

Play

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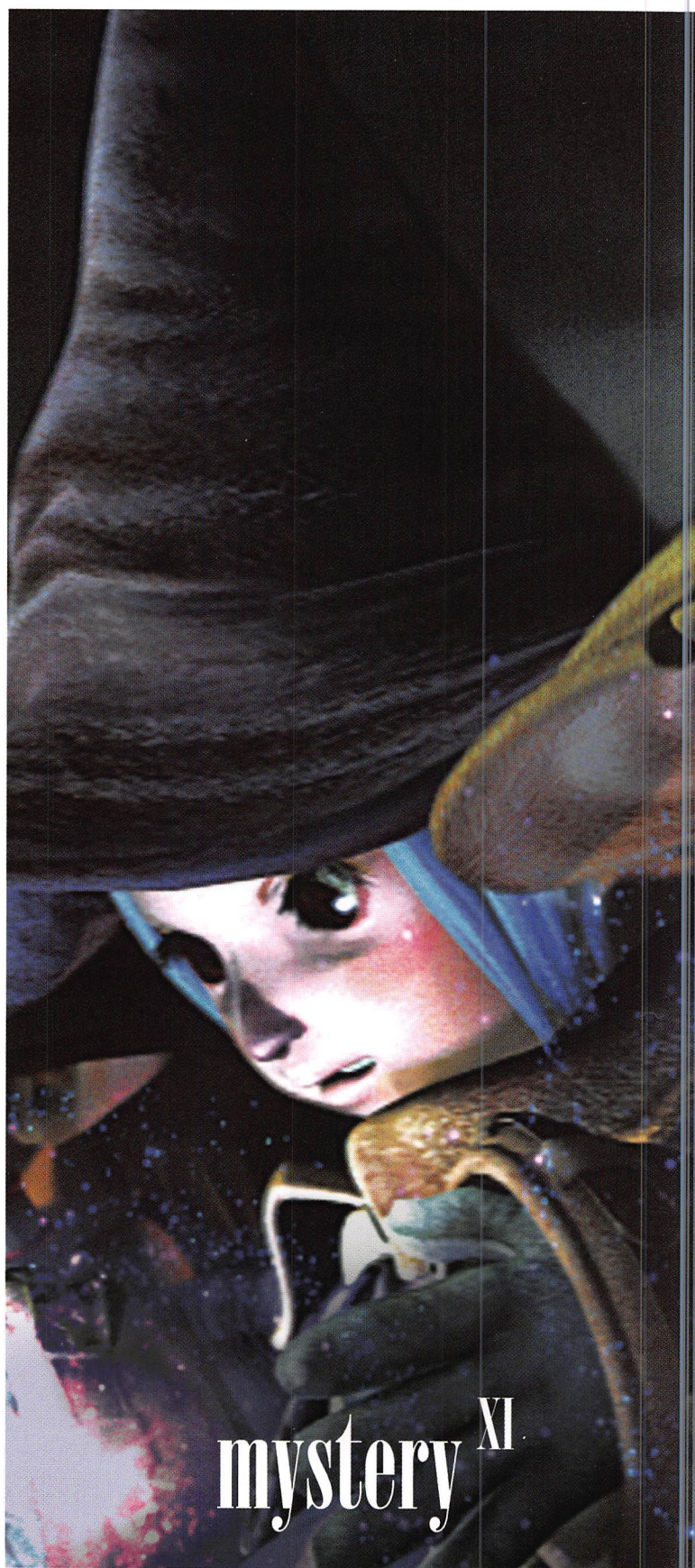
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conquest XI



mystery XI

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Little Wonders



While 2004 is getting off to a great start, heading into E3, I can't help but think about all of the promising games that disappeared in what seemed like the worst holiday glut ever. We watch

so many games evolve each year, surrounded by excited studios and optimistic PR, only to die a horrible death amidst the Q4 blitzkrieg. E3 is slowly becoming the first leg of a funeral procession rather than a launching pad.

So much of what we're told to like is hatched in focus tests and then cycled through the major retail chains these days; you really have no idea how much danger original game creation is in. Small studios are dropping like flies, leaving much of the real talent in the industry stuck on the outside looking in. If that big, original game you just shipped doesn't perform for the publisher, even if it's for reasons beyond your control, there is rarely a second chance waiting. As a result, some of the best minds in gaming (and their games), unwilling to conform to the rigors of mainstream game making, are floating in limbo, contemplating whether to keep fighting or just go find work...and this past Q4 didn't help. Games like *Armed and Dangerous*, *Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy*, *Goblin Commander*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Metal Arms*, *Kya: Dark Lineage* and *Otogi* underperformed, given their quality, while inferior games that followed the new methodology thrived. So, how has this happened? How has big business succeeded in leading the mass market to the slaughter? Well, for starters, for the mass market, that slaughter is their reality.

The question is: why do companies let their original games fly when they're most vulnerable to getting lost in the shuffle in the first place? Behind every original new game, there's a publisher and studio hanging in the balance, so why run the risk?

Why go through so much to make a great game only to sacrifice it at year's end? Is it because people are out shopping in record numbers? That seems a flawed strategy. Aren't even mildly avid gamers always up on new releases and looking for great games? We don't buy games only at Christmas. The strangest thing is that the Q4 glut is always followed by the Q1 drought. Wouldn't this be a better time to let your original game fly? I suppose it's also possible that the avid consumer base simply isn't large enough for how bloated the industry has become. Perhaps the numbers games like *GTA III*, *Wind Waker*, *Mario Kart*, *Tony Hawk*, *Enter the Matrix* and *Madden* have posted are leading publishers to believe there's a larger potential base than there really is.

My concern is that we may be shifting into an era where innovation and originality is so stifled by paranoia, we could slip into a period of mediocrity. As long as companies like Capcom, Konami, Sega and Nintendo, along with smaller, aggressive third-parties like Sammy, Majesco, Atlus and Koei can keep things on an even keel, we're fine, but if the new retail hierarchy in this country begins to erode their master plan, we may be in for rough weather. Maybe that other side of gaming should get together and make spring the new Christmas!

"Why go through so much to make a great game only to sacrifice it at year's end?"

Dave Halverson Editor-in-chief
dhalverson@playmagazine.com

Editorial

Editor In Chief	Dave Halverson
Editorial Director	Brady Fiechter
Senior Editor	Chris Hoffman
Editorial Assistant	Christina Alexander
Editor At Large / Technology Editor	Tom Ham
Music Editor	Lucas Mast
PC Editor	Mike Griffin
Contributing Newswriter	David Chapman

Design

Art Director	Michael Hobbs
Associate Art Director	Nelson Lu

Advertising and Sales

Publisher	Michael Eisenberg
Contact	Michael Eisenberg sales@playmagazine.com Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102 Fax 818.707.7212

Account Executive	Kimberly Ratican kratican@playmagazine.com
-------------------	---

Newsstand Manager	Howard White hwhite9611@aol.com 508.984.5085
-------------------	--

Corporate

Director Of Operations	Julie Halverson jhalverson@playmagazine.com 818.707.7786 ext.104
Administrative Assistant	Christina Alexander calexander@playmagazine.com

Subscriptions And Customer Service
888.922.6122
e-mail: playquest@mcmillenncomm.com

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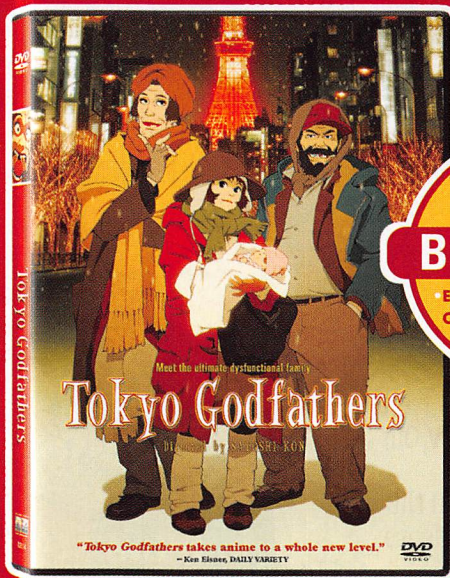
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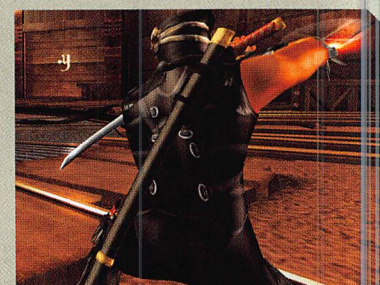
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Monster Hunter



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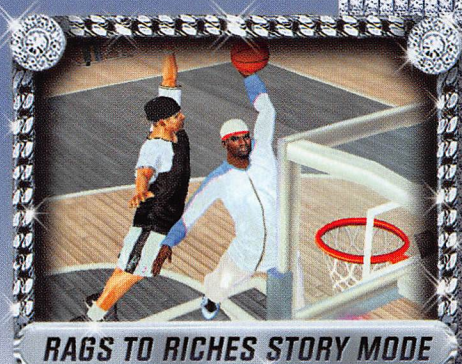
Mega Man



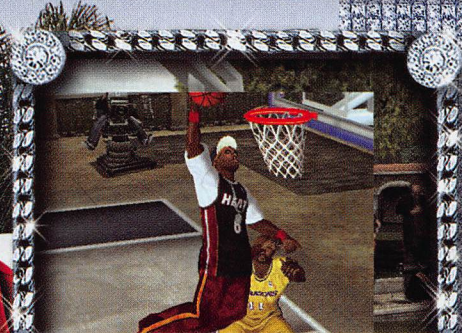
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Ninja Gaiden

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play pc

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Slayers Gorgeous



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Letter of the month

For too long I've been seeing too many complaints about the way women are portrayed in video games. People (usually women) moan about how these digital divas are always shown to be super-sexy, and wear skimpy outfits, and they want that to change. Now, I know exactly why polygonal chicks are shown that way, but I won't go into that, because we all know why. No, my whole point is taken on the other side. How about all the digital dudes in games? The men portrayed in games as muscular, handsome fellows that overflow in video games. There are always games with shirtless men showing their pecs and biceps and such. How come nobody ever complains about that? Why is it that only the smaller percentage of the gender in games (female) is always pointed out and ridiculed? Throughout the history of games, there always have been more males in games than females. Go back to Street Fighter II; where there were eight characters, seven of them were male. Why, even then, was Chun-Li pointed out as the sex object in that game? Sure, not all the males in that game were hunks, but who's to argue that Ken wasn't handsome, that Guile wasn't a muscular, sexy man? (Though the hair might put people off.)

Most of that argument is about how games are mostly played by guys, and even though the games are populated by a majority of males, the few females are designed to appeal to the guys playing them. Well, I'm sorry that more guys play than girls (although it is slowly balancing out now, but still not quite even), but how many guys said that they played SFII just for Chun-Li?

And what about the current games? Take Metal Gear Solid, for example. Some can say that Snake is a kinda rugged-handsome man. And, I challenge any female gamer to say that they didn't enjoy seeing Raiden's bare ass while he runs around naked. There are countless other games out there that can say the same about how the male gender is portrayed with the ideal features. Women argue that the females portrayed in games have an ideal, unattainable body structure. Well, how about the vast number of ideal, unattainable male body structures that run

rampant through our games? You don't see Johnny Couch-Potato complaining about how he wants to see more male leads in games with a beer belly! And you wanna know why? For the same reason you don't see other guys writing this same letter as I am: they don't want all the flack that I know I'm gonna get from all the naysayers of good looking women in games!

But you know what? Sexy bodies, male and female, have been in video games for years, and they're not going anywhere anytime soon. And no amount of bitching is gonna take away our DOA: Xtreme Beach Volleyball! For every XBIV, there are ten naked Raidens running around holding their crotch! (Okay, bad image in head, not going away!! AAAUUGGH!)

Well, that's it for my ranting. Now for

"And, I challenge any female gamer to say that they didn't enjoy seeing Raiden's bare ass while he runs around naked."

some artwork! I've wanted to send some of my artwork in to magazines for a long time; I've just been too damn lazy to do it. So here's two of them, for your enjoyment! (Speaking of which, I think **play** should have a Letter Art page. Sure, it's been done to death, but if you put in high quality pieces, it can add to your already excellent magazine!) The two that I'm sending are just things I've done out of boredom, and a kind of a wager. A while ago, a friend said that he didn't think I could make a CG Link. So guess what? I worked for a month and a half on him, but I got a pretty good-looking Link going here. So now that I have him, I decided to put him in cool poses and make cool pictures of him!

Anonymous

It's all too good

Too much good? Yeah, I'd have to say so. Normally I wouldn't go so far as to say that there are too many good games coming out, but I must say exactly that right now.

On top of having a job, responsibilities, and

hanging out with friends, I'm an avid gamer. I play nearly ever genre of games, and I own all three of the next-gen systems, as well as a GBA SP and a high-end computer. I don't have to worry about not being able to play the latest and greatest game. So what am I worried about? Having too many of the latest and greatest games.

Perhaps my problem is liking so many RPGs, which take out a large chunk of my time. But it's not these games alone that are my problem. I still haven't finished Xenosaga, Kingdom Hearts, Final Fantasy Origins (either game), Viewtiful Joe, Metroid Prime, Final Fantasy Tactics or Knights Of The Old Republic on top of others I've long forgotten by now. But now that I'm about to beat Final Fantasy X-2, you'd think I'd have more time, right? Wrong. I've got Sword of

Mana, Metroid: Zero Mission, Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles, on top of whatever other game I want that I haven't managed to get in the recent past (Tony Hawk's Underground, the most recent Castlevania game I've not had the time to play...).

Sure, there are tons of crappy games out there, but I don't get a chance to enjoy all the good ones that I have. Am I complaining? Yes. Do I want games to be less good? No. Do I want less good games? Well, yes. Okay, so really I want all games to be good, but with this many good games to play, I don't have the time. By the time I've caught up with all the games I own, I'll be buying more of the great games that will be coming out next holiday season. And still there will be other older games that I haven't yet played but simply must.

It must be good to be game magazine editors; you get paid to play all the games that I have to pay to play. Lucky you.

Alas, a gamer's job is never done. Now it's off to defeat the Mother Brain and find what secrets await me after that, and then search through my games and get some sort of game plan down (no pun intended). Either

that or I'll just have to quit my job, drop my friends, and leave my responsibilities behind. But then there would be no money to buy new games, no friends to play Halo with (and eventually, Halo 2), and no place to go when I get too stressed out over saving the world constantly.

mewithoutYou

Boy, do we hear you. Even with gaming as a full-time job, it's hard to get around to everything. We're looking into getting the day changed to 36 hours so we can squeeze everything in.

Humble requester

Here is my small request. I'm a PC gamer from Venezuela and don't really like consoles, which doesn't mean I don't truly love some console games like Prince of Persia, the truly unbelievable Beyond Good and Evil, Metal Gear Solid 2 and so on. My humble request for you is that you expand your PC coverage a little, and also I have noticed some of the games you preview and review, in the platform area you put PS2 or Xbox, and sometimes that game is also being developed for the PC, it will be nice to have this written in there too. And also, when you cover some console games, it will be great to know if there's any chance the developers are working on a PC version. That sound like a lot of requests? Thanks a lot!!!

Regards from Caracas!

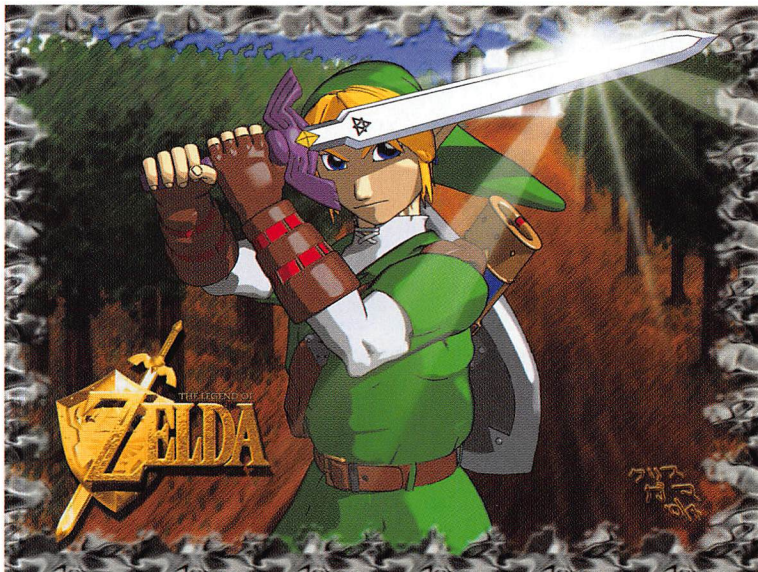
Andy K.

In the works, Andy.

Idea #2...

...is imbedded in a conversation between me and a friend, the same friend as before:

friend: an awesome new pokemon game is coming out
me: i wish i could remember the name of this very funny pornographic manga i came



Our anonymous Letter of the Month author also supplied his own rendition of Link, pictured above, in his bid to introduce a reader art page.

across at random at Borders a long time ago
 friend: way excited
 friend: it's an RPG
 friend: let's hope it's a true rpg
 friend: the one on gameboy was one of the best games ever made
 me: yeah, let's hope it's a fantastic calculator game made for 11 year old japanese boys

friend: you just don't understand art me: :D
 <snip>
 me: they should just make the fights automatic in rpgs, like they were in Ys. see in that game, you ran up to an opponent, zelda-style, except either you or the bad guy would get hurt or die automatically without you even having to engage in combat, based on who was more powerful

friend: that takes a lot of fun out of it me: you know what i would like to see?
 me: a video game that takes blood samples, brain scans and report cards from you while it is loading up and at the title screen tells your chances at beating it
 friend: very weird
 me: if your chances are very low, it will automatically cut to a pokemon game
 me: ha ha
 friend: good one

Matthew D.

Say Halo

Hey, this is my first time writing to a magazine, and just wanted to get some thoughts out about Halo. When I was playing the level "The Maw," it just occurred to me that the Fore Runner might be humans. If you notice, the Monitor starts going on about how it is great to finally have records of all their lost times, when he downloaded the files off the Pillar of Autumn. Also keep in mind that the environment of Halo is much similar to that of Earth. If you have seen all of those movies where the bacteria of Earth kills off alien attackers, this should have happened to the Marines, but it didn't. Chances are the Marine's bodies already had immunities to the environment's germs. Take note of how the Monitor also could speak perfect English, without ever having contact with another human being before then. Anyways

these are just a few thoughts, and I think it would be cool if the Fore Runner could come back and kick the Covenant's ass. Thanks for reading this, and hope Halo 2 has bots! I don't have DSL or cable so I'm a little limited.

Zach (Tice in Halo)

Anyone?

Poster Child

I'm a relatively new subscriber to Play. It was your article on Contra: Shattered Soldier that simultaneously caught my attention and sold me on your magazine—and I hate gaming magazines. That article could've come directly from the feather-tipped quills of angels. So thanks a lot for not sucking, which seems to be en vogue these days, and I'll keep subscribing for as long as you keep it up!

Now on to the point of my letter: you have some truly awesome two-page pictorials of various gaming chicks (with the occasional boring sports car), which would be prime for easily removable centerfold-style pin-ups. C'mon guys, I've got a whole lot of empty wall space, step it up!

Harrigan

More Contra is on the way, so hopefully we cannot suck twice in a row. We're looking at ways to feature centerfold action as well.



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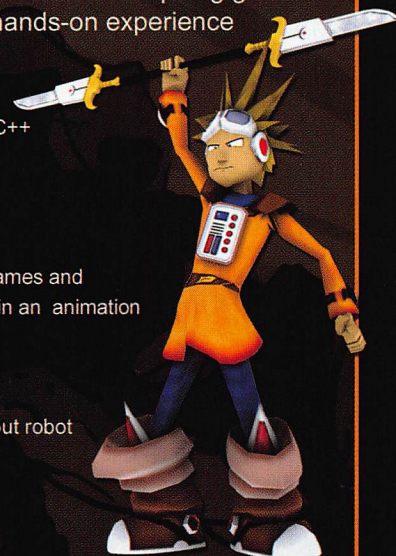
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Sneak in the Grass

Creator Hideo Kojima reveals Metal Gear Solid 3 secrets



"They'll kill me!" said a smiling Hideo Kojima, responding to a recently gathered group of editors' prying questions about the hotly anticipated Metal Gear Solid 3. "They" is the team currently toiling away in Japan for the game's done-when-it's-done release (at least before the holidays). When you're the boss, the death threats aren't that severe: "That's OK, because I'll tell you anyway."

Well, at least a little something, anyway. Kojima is indeed the boss, after all, and most of the intricate details behind his fastidious project will intentionally remain an enticing mystery up until its release. Answers to most of our questions remained brief and general, but there was one very important revelation: the radar screen you've become accustomed to has been replaced by what is being called the Camouflage Index. In the upper-right-hand corner of the screen sits a small box with a percentage indicator, ranging from the negative to 100 depending on how well Snake is hidden from the enemy. Throughout the game, Snake discovers all sorts of camouflage gear, which he must wear accordingly to blend in with the terrain he is sneaking across. The outfits can be switched on the fly, supplemented by various forms of face paint.

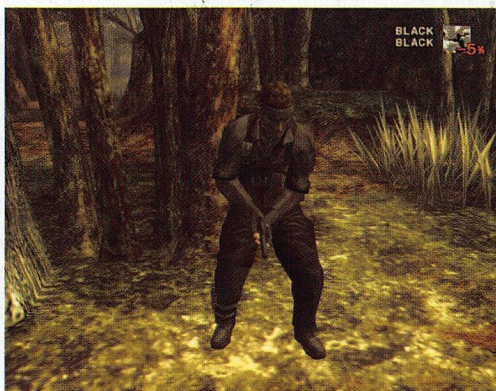
If the meter is at, say, 60 percent, what does that actually mean? No clue; very little was shown on this new camouflage technique and the implications of the outcome across the percentages, but imagine the interesting gameplay possibilities that could springboard from this. A new ability Snake will rely on as a part of this process is crouching and stalking, which will affect the index readout differently than if he were running, walking, or lying down. Of course, no matter how well hidden Snake could ever be, as always, you're gonna have to pay close attention to the noise you're making, no matter what position you may be in.

The gist of the event mostly covered the introduction of the camouflage index, but a few hints were dropped on what other components we can expect from Metal Gear Solid 3. Set in a new era of the '60s, the "survival gameplay," as it was described in Kojima's presentation, will take Snake through the jungle and into the surrounding caves, mountains and desert-like region. Kojima said most of the adventure will take place in the outdoor wilderness—appropriate considering the camouflage trappings. And when asked if the game will have an eye-popping opening in tradition with Metal Gear Solid 2, his response was an enthusiastic "yes": Kyle Cooper is once again staging the fireworks for the game's setup.

So what about the thousand other questions players might have? "We can't really comment" is about all you get for now. As for whether Snake will survive on animals for his nourishment—this game is going for stylized realism—Kojima said to expect the consumption of alligators, frogs, snakes, birds and... "I respect Mr. Miyamoto, so there will be mushrooms in the game."

Master of disguise

Blend in with the surroundings by using various combinations of face paint and costume patterns.



EA and Marvel Prepare For a Fight

Crossover agreement yields new games and characters

Spider-Man. The X-Men. The Fantastic Four. For years, these comic book characters have squared off against a wide range of villains. Now, Marvel's superheroes are about to face a new stable of adversaries, courtesy of Electronic Arts. In February, the two companies signed a multi-year deal which gives EA the rights to develop fighting games pitting the Marvel cast against a new set of original characters. The games are currently being developed for multiple platforms at Electronic Arts Canada, with the first in the line expected to be released towards the end of 2005. As part of the new arrangement, Marvel has been granted the exclusive licensing rights for the new EA characters, which will appear in comic books, toys and other media outlets. We recently had the chance to talk about the new deal with Ames Kirshen, Marvel's manager of game development.

How involved will Marvel be in Electronic Arts' development of the new fighting game?

Ames Kirshen: As we do with all our other game licensees, we will oversee all game development on the EA titles on the Marvel side, working very closely with the production team at EA to discuss ideas and implementation.

Will Marvel have a hand in creating the new characters introduced in the game, or will they be developed strictly in-house at EA?

The new EA characters are going to be created by EA. However, Marvel and EA are working together on how to best integrate the Marvel characters with the new EA characters. Marvel has great expertise in movies, publishing and merchandising, which we are sharing with EA in order to make these games into a very successful franchise.

It has been mentioned that the original characters from the upcoming game will actually show up in comic format. How does Marvel plan to do this?

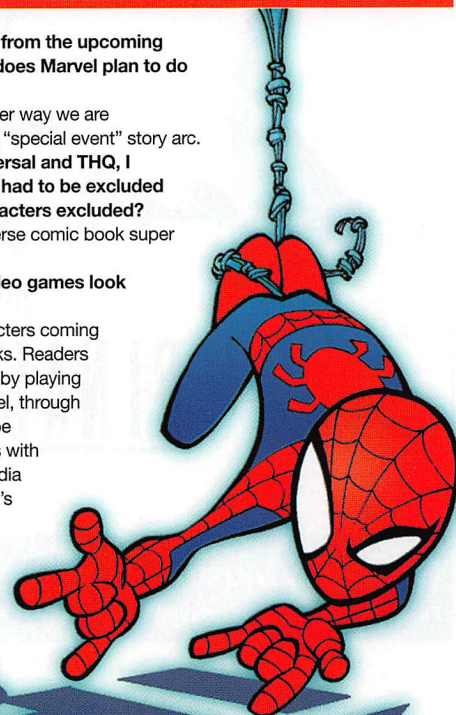
We are currently exploring different scenarios, but either way we are anticipating that the comic books will be an incredible "special event" story arc.

Due to prior license agreements with Vivendi Universal and THQ, I understand that the Hulk and Punisher characters had to be excluded from the deal with EA. Were any other Marvel characters excluded?

Those families of characters are the only Marvel Universe comic book super heroes that are excluded.

Finally, what can fans of both comic books and video games look forward to as a result of the deal with EA?

Fans can look forward to a totally new group of characters coming to life for the first time on the pages of our comic books. Readers and others will then be able to add to that experience by playing as or against these characters in the EA games. Marvel, through its representation of the new EA characters, will also be working on broadening the reach of the EA characters with consumer products such as toys and apparel and media opportunities such as movies and television shows. It's truly a groundbreaking collaborative project for both companies, one which we think will be immensely popular with fans of both the comic book and video game mediums.



Ghost Joint

Manga Entertainment and Bandai Entertainment have announced that they will jointly distribute the all-new *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* anime TV series worldwide. The latest *Ghost* saga, co-produced by both companies along with Japan's acclaimed Production I.G. (*Kill Bill*, *Blood the Last Vampire*, *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade*) consists of 26 futuristic half-hour episodes that will be released on DVD this summer along with a subsequent U.S. cable television broadcast. Any *Ghost in the Shell* fan will tell you that the only problem with the first film was the ending, and so news of the new series has been well received in the anime community, although *Ghost in the Shell* promises to spark a lot of crossover interest much like the recent *Spirited Away*.

Stand Alone Complex presents a new vision of the future in which female cyborg Major Motoko Kusanagi and her fellow police officers of Section 9 hunt down criminals in both the real world and online, so a-diving she will go. Set in the not-too-distant future where technology plays a key role in everyday human life, the new show, produced by an incredible creative team including Yoko Kanno (*Cowboy Bebop*), Kenji Kamiyama (*Blood the Last Vampire*, *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade*) and the talented staff at Production I.G. (*Dead Leaves*, *Patlabor 1&2*) uses the latest in full CG animation and presents

dramatic themes, illustrious characters and meticulous design. "The release of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* marks an exciting and important milestone for anime and its ever-increasing popularity in mainstream pop culture here in the United States," said Ken Iyadomi, executive vice president of Bandai Entertainment. Manga Entertainment's CEO, Marvin Gleicher, added: "We are very excited to join with our friends at Bandai Entertainment in releasing this excellent new anime series. There is no title that better represents the bright future of Japanese animation than *Ghost in the Shell*."

The original *Ghost in the Shell* feature film is one of the most widely recognized anime films ever released and continues to be a best seller today. The film was a key influence for the Wachowski brothers in creating *The Matrix* trilogy and is featured prominently on the *Animatrix* DVD extras along with being the first Japanese animated film to reach #1 in the U.S. Billboard Video Chart back in August 1996.

Stand Alone Complex is set for release on June 27, 2004 and will be supported by a joint summer marketing campaign between Manga Entertainment and Bandai Entertainment. www.ghostintheshell.tv

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Final Fantasy concert coming to America

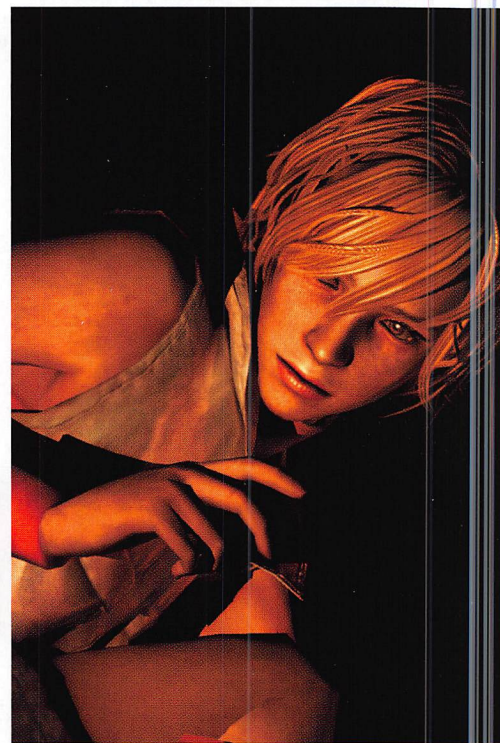


Final Fantasy composer
Nobuo Uematsu

Video game music: a fantastic art form that can produce unforgettable emotions in those that experience it, but one that has rarely been afforded the same type of prestige as other types of music in the U.S.—until now. Square Enix has announced that on May 10, a Final Fantasy symphonic concert, titled “Dear Friends – Music From Final Fantasy,” will be performed in the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, California. The two-hour event will be scored by legendary Final Fantasy composer Nobuo Uematsu and performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Master Chorale. “I am overjoyed about the Final Fantasy concert to be held in Los Angeles,” Uematsu said in a press statement. “With this being the first Final Fantasy orchestral concert outside of Japan, it marks a very exciting moment in the history of the franchise. I am looking forward to seeing our fans at the concert in May.” As of press time, details such as cost and ticket availability had yet to be announced, but the latest information can be found at <http://www.square-enix-usa.com/uematsu>.

Rumors and bits

Well this certainly ain't good news: Sony's highly anticipated portable, the PSP, has been relocated from a November release to early next year. On the other hand, there will be some sort of substantial connectivity with the PS2, perhaps well beyond what you might expect. ... Movie-license king EA is well in development on the next GoldenEye at their new LA studios, taking the game into much darker territory. ... And wouldn't you know it, GTA continues with the all-new Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, to be released October 19 for PS2. Apparently, the game will be set in a fictional city drawn from San Francisco. Over 30 million copies of the series have been shipped worldwide. ... Take this rumor for what it's worth: whispers from within Nintendo suggest that a more mature, realistic Zelda title may be shown at E3. Also, the GC Zelda: Four Swords game could end up as another pack-in/freebie available only through special promotions. ... Sony keeps on marching forward, selling—not shipping—upwards of 25 million PS2s. Around 2.6 million of those are being used online.



“Silent Hill is a groundbreaking game...it is scary and clever,” Gans said in a statement about the project. “I am very proud to be associated with this game.”

To make sure that the film accurately recreates the look and feel of the Silent Hill games, Konami will be actively involved in the production of the movie, from script supervision to monster design and sound production. Konami has also announced that it is actively pursuing the development of its other games into feature films, although no specifics have been announced at this time.

Growlanser Grows Deluxe Version

Working Designs' beleaguered Growlanser Generations—containing Growlanser II: The Sense of Justice and Growlanser III: The Dual Darkness—still doesn't have a release date, but the company has revealed that when it does finally see release, there will be a limited Deluxe Pack version, making up approximately 20 percent of the production run, alongside the standard edition. Specific contents haven't been revealed, but there will be five promotional goodies in the Deluxe Pack, including a 25-track soundtrack CD, and the price will likely fall between \$79 and \$89. “With the exception of that crazy ‘Eno delivers one-of-a-kind crap from Enemy Zero production to your door’ deluxe pack in Japan, this will probably be amongst the best offered,” proclaimed Working Designs president Victor Ireland on the company's message board.

GROWLANSER
GENERATIONS

Silent Film Makes Some Noise

Director, producer named

Just when you thought it was safe to go to the movies, along comes a sleepy little town known as Silent Hill. Konami has teamed up with production company Davis Films to bring the psychologically disturbing horror franchise from the living room to the silver screen. The film will be produced by Samuel Hadida (*True Romance*, *Spider*). Hadida is no stranger to motion pictures based on survival horror games, having served as both producer on *Resident Evil* and executive producer on its sequel, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*.

French director Christophe Gans has been signed to helm the Silent Hill movie. Gans is best known for his directorial work on *Crying Freeman* and *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, both of which were also produced by Hadida.

PLUG it in & PLAY TV GAMES

Plug-and-play from Capcom and Midway

Jakks Pacific has already found success with their TV Games products—all-in-one bundles that integrate classic games and hardware right into the controller for a simple plug-and-play retro gaming experience—but their latest announcements for the line are the most potentially exciting yet: TV Games containing titles from Capcom and Midway. Capcom TV Games will feature Ghosts 'n Goblins, Mega Man, Side Arms, Gun.Smoke and 1942, while Midway TV Games will contain Mortal Kombat, Smash TV, Rampage, Joust, Robotron: 2048, Marble Madness, Paperboy, Super Sprint, Spy Hunter and Defender I & II; both will be available late this year or early in 2005. According to Jakks, all the games will remain true to their arcade or console counterparts and will actually emulate or use the original games' program code. The design of the units haven't been decided yet—no word if there will be dual joysticks for authentic Smash TV action—but the price will be kept low at only \$20. Additionally, this year Jakks will be releasing an Atari Paddle Games unit (including Pong, Breakout, Night Driver and eight more) and one based upon EA Sports, which will offer classic 16-bit versions of EA's famous franchises.

BAM goes VIS



One of the latest companies to be gobbled up by the bigger sharks in the competitive gaming seas, Scottish developer VIS has recently undergone steps to reside under the BAM label. The choice to bring the developer of such titles as State of Emergency and Earthworm Jim 3D was in no small part to the acquisition of State of Emergency's upcoming sequel. Said Ken Lewandowski, chairman of VIS, "Our agreement with BAM!, which represents a significant development for VIS, would enable our company to participate in a new enterprise with the scope to both develop and publish its own properties." No word if or how this will affect VIS' other development projects, such as Midway's Narc.

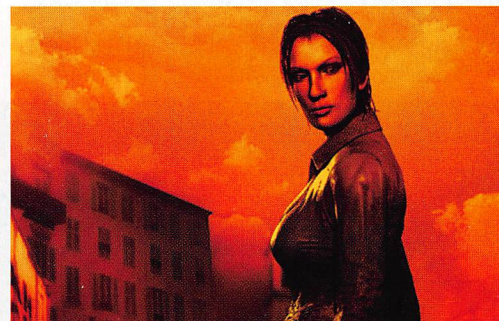


A GameCube fit for a Snake

As this issue hits newsstands, Konami's exceptional Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes should have recently been released in both the U.S. and Japan...but it's only in the Land of the Rising Sun that you'll be able to find this super-cool limited edition Metal Gear Solid set. Not only does the bundle include a special edition platinum GameCube with the FoxHound logo emblazoned on the top, it also comes with an art book, a GameCube disc containing an emulated version of the original Famicom Metal Gear and, naturally, a copy of Twin Snakes. If you're lucky (and have about \$250 to burn), you still may be able to order one from your favorite import shop.

Ridley Scott Associates promotes Driv3r

The hype machine for Driv3r is starting to heat up. One of the cool ideas pushing the cinematic action-driving game is the seminal three-part series of short films on the official website, www.driv3r.com. Pieced together by Ridley Scott Associates, the introductory short, called "Run the Gauntlet," was viewed by over 500,000 viewers in its first week. The one-minute episodes are the first time ever a Hollywood production company has created such a promotional tool for a video game. Before the game launches on June 1, check out the full production of "Run the Gauntlet" starting April 1.



Neo More Red Pills for Ubisoft

Warner and the Wachowskis take their online show on the road

Now that the *Matrix* trilogy has come to a close, Warner Bros. and Ubisoft have made the recent decision to mutually terminate their co-publishing partnership with *The Matrix Online*. The massively multiplayer online game is, however, still on course for a holiday release. "Ubisoft has been a great partner and we look forward to continuing our publishing relationship with them on several other projects," said Jason Hall, senior vice president, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. "Development of the *Matrix Online* game is still being handled by Monolith Productions. We are on schedule for our November release and are moving towards our planned open beta this spring." A handful of other projects are still in the works between the two companies.



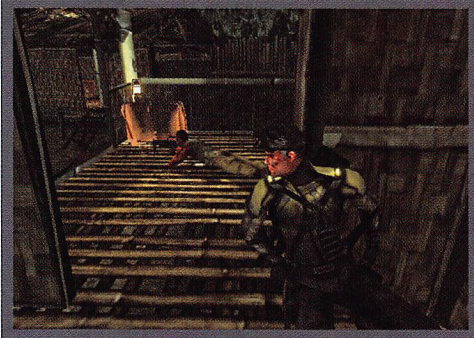
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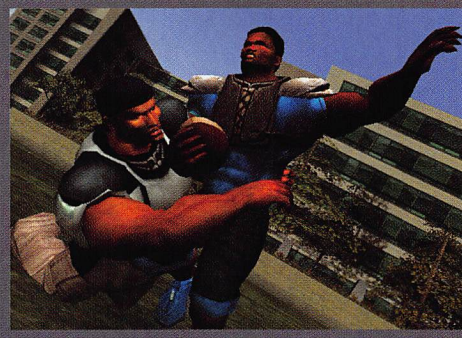
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow ubisoft / xb
02	Fight Night 2004 ea / ps2
03	MVP Baseball 2004 ea / ps2
04	Ninja Gaiden tecmo / xb
05	Ghost Recon: Jungle Storm ubisoft / ps2
06	007: Everything or Nothing ea / ps2
07	NFL Street ea / ps2
08	Counter-Strike: Condition Zero vu games / pc
09	World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 konami / ps2
10	Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes konami / gc



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Jan. Game Sales

01	NFL Street ea / ps2
02	Sonic Heroes sega / gc
03	Need for Speed Underground ea / ps2
04	NFL Street ea / xb
05	Grand Theft Auto Double Pack rockstar / xb
06	Mario Kart: Double Dash!! nintendo / gc
07	Halo microsoft / xb
08	True Crime: Streets of LA activision / ps2
09	Madden NFL 2004 ea / ps2
10	Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II vu games / ps2



Your Megastore Beckons!



Rainbow Six 3

ubisoft / ps2
A little first-person military action, a little team-based gameplay, a lot of strategy to counter the aggression. And an awesome online experience.



Tokyo Xtreme Racer 3

crave / ps2
It's time to once again hit the Tokyo highways and live out those street-racing fantasies, now with licensed vehicles from Toyota, Ford and more.



Fight Night 2004

ea / ps2, xb
EA Sports delivers the next big thing in boxing games. Use Total Punch Control for full mastery of the game's 32 real-life boxing superstars.

Staff and reader selections

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01	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater konami / ps2
02	Resident Evil 4 capcom / gc
03	Final Fantasy XII square enix / ps2
04	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2
05	Neo Contra konami / ps2



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Ninja Gaiden tecmo / xb
02	Sudeki microsoft / xb
03	Crimson Sea 2 koei / ps2
04	Samurai Jack sega / xb
05	Pitfall Harry activision / xb



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	The Suffering midway / xb
02	Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II vu games / ps2
03	Breakdown namco / xb
04	NFL Street ea / ps2
05	World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 konami / ps2

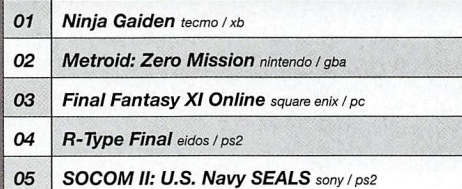


Chris Hoffman some editor

01	Mega Man Anniversary Collection capcom / gba
02	Astro Boy: Omega Factor sega / gba
03	Metroid: Zero Mission nintendo / gba
04	Final Fantasy X-2 square enix / ps2
05	Crimson Sea 2 koei / ps2

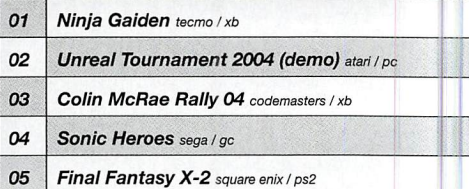
Michael Hobbs art director

01	Ninja Gaiden tecmo / xb
02	Metroid: Zero Mission nintendo / gba
03	Final Fantasy XI Online square enix / pc
04	R-Type Final eidos / ps2
05	SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALs sony / ps2



Nelson Lui associate art director

01	Ninja Gaiden tecmo / xb
02	Unreal Tournament 2004 (demo) atari / pc
03	Colin McRae Rally 04 codemasters / xb
04	Sonic Heroes sega / gc
05	Final Fantasy X-2 square enix / ps2



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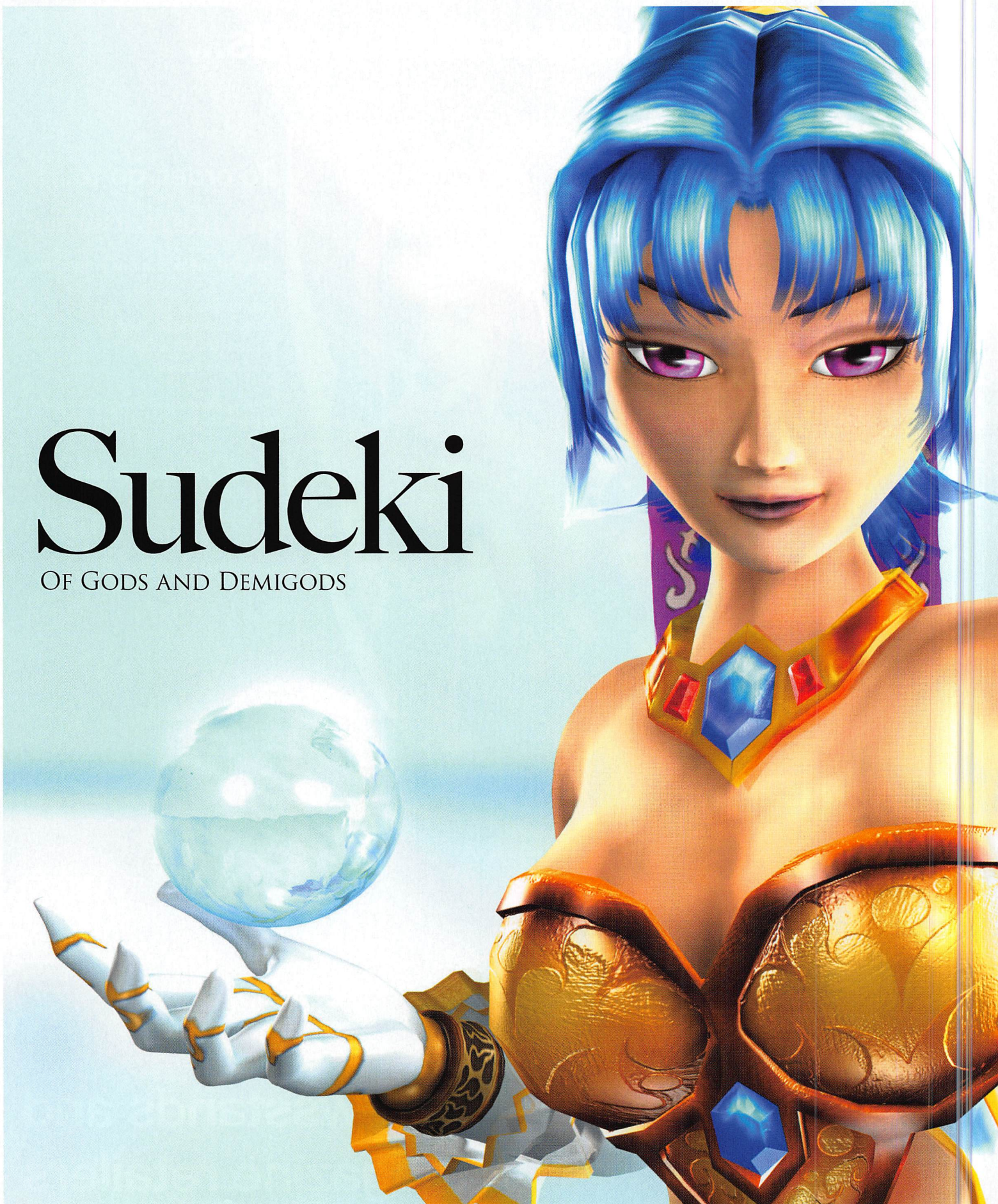
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Sudeki

OF GODS AND DEMIGODS





Bestowed reign as the sole deity for all of Sudeki's subjects to worship, Tetsu, heir to the realm of Omnion, longed for another god to share his celestial home—so drawn from his own crystal skin, another child was born. At first, the brothers celebrated and shared their world, but the split spawned a twin, selfish and drawn to the dark, ultimately banishing his weaker brother, who fled to seek help in the world of Sudeki. Four warriors answered the call and a war was waged, eventually splitting their world in two, leaving them lingering in the afterglow, unable to reach the afterlife. A millennium later, the prophecy long passed into legend, two nearly identical Worlds of Sudeki—one dark and one light—are about to collide.

This summer, Xbox gamers will receive one of the few remaining cogs in the mighty Microsoft gear works—that all-important, first-brand, elite action-RPG. Like *Zelda* to Nintendo or *Final Fantasy* to Sony (*Final Fantasy X-2* cracked a million before the year was out and *Wind Waker* is well on its way to the two-million mark), with *Sudeki*, *Climax* and *MGS* will attempt to hit it big in a genre that knows no bounds but leaves little room for error. Hitting pay dirt on the Xbox will be no easy task. Given the technical prowess of the system's benchmarks, an older demographic and today's slipshod U.S. market, it's a slippery slope: too much action and you seep into the crowded adventure market, while a brand built around a turn-based battle system at this juncture would likely go directly into the tank. Too cute and you alienate too many; too risqué and you lose that all-important sense of wonder. So what to do? *Sudeki*.

Playing well into a preview version, I found

Sudeki neither a *Zelda* nor a *Final Fantasy*, but more of a melding of the two, while containing elements that endeavor to improve on both, along with just the right touch of time-honored sheen—like chests and breakable objects scattered about to be pillaged for potions and money and the ability to open enormous doors with a simple flick of the wrist or snap of the fingers. Suspension of disbelief is alive and well and still living in console RPGs. *Sudeki*, in fact, feels a lot like a traditional turn-based RPG, steeped in reams of story and hierarchy, drenched in a kind of steampunk fantasy, until you get to the hook: real-time on-the-fly control over four very different characters—like *Brute Force*, only in a more interactive role-playing environment. Segueing into battle, for instance—a seamless proposition amidst the game's wholly real-time design—*Tal* and *Buki* fight melee-style, utilizing a three-point combo system to link moves along with the ability to block and maneuver, while *Allish* and *Elco* prefer ranged

“RARELY, IF EVER, HAVE I SEEN SO MUCH TEXTURE AND FINE DETAIL IN SO VAST A GAME...”



PRINCESS ALLISH

Daughter of Lusica, the last surviving member of the Felson Dynasty

attacks via a fully functional first-person view. All four can use skills and Spirit Strikes—spectacular displays of ethereal light for healing and powerful assaults—and have access to an array of menu items without interrupting battle: by slowing the action to a crawl, Sudeki creates turn-based management in real-time situations. The result is a bottomless pit of tactics as you jump in and out of battles as each battle deems, lording over your assailants like a grand host. Combined with the spectacle of the attackers and the integrity of your surroundings, Sudeki's battles are both a refreshing break from the turn-based norm and a wonder to behold, whether you're fighting solo or commanding all four characters.

The driving force behind the game, the team dynamic, carries over into the game's vast wilderness and keeps via topography interlaced with character-specific points of interaction in league with your current party. Buki can use her claws to scale walls; Elco can boost and hover; Tal can move heavy objects; and Allish can make the invisible visible. Joined with the

fighting and traditional RPG apparatus, the end result is a fusion of turn-based depth, compelling adventure, captivating battles and reams of spoken conversation, all wrapped in nearly inconceivable beauty—exactly what you'd expect from a first-party action-RPG.

The odd thing about Sudeki is that it comes from a European developer known for their racing games, with the same name as one of Japan's most respected action-RPG developers (Climax), responsible for Landstalker (arguably the best ever pre-3D) and Dark Savior, among others. How in the world did they get the call, and where were they hiding their obvious affection for anime/manga design all this time? Turned-up noses, small mouths, saucer eyes—the stars of Sudeki are undeniably manga-inspired, yet they inhabit a storybook world that is decidedly Euro-tastic, from the colorful stone structures, cobblestone roads and outdoor markets to the red-drenched ornate royal courts and neo-medieval architecture. If nothing else, Sudeki is unique unto itself in design, on top of being a

Above: Tal and Allish travel in style. What you see is what you play.





ELCO

Illumina's chief science officer



Allish contemplates the dark, alternate world of Sudeki...

game that celebrates the actual journey like no other—a grand vision painstakingly brought to life by the developer that brought us...MotoGP 2 and ATV Quad Power Racing? Rarely, if ever, have I seen so much texture and fine detail in so vast a game, let alone manipulating four beautifully modeled characters at will. Allish and Tal are especially striking. Her brass brazier and frilly white one-piece are completely separate from her skin, as are his many separate plates of armor, unlike so many games that crudely paint clothing on as textures. Touches like Allish's hair and the way she unknowingly lifts her breasts in her idle animation are what I dream about. My apologies for pointing that out, but these are the types of things I feel truly set a game apart. Seeing four characters of such integrity on screen with a gargantuan bump-mapped boss or several highly detailed beasts amidst a light show of illuminated transparencies and explosions is what it's all about. How they're locking it all down at 30 frames is beyond me.

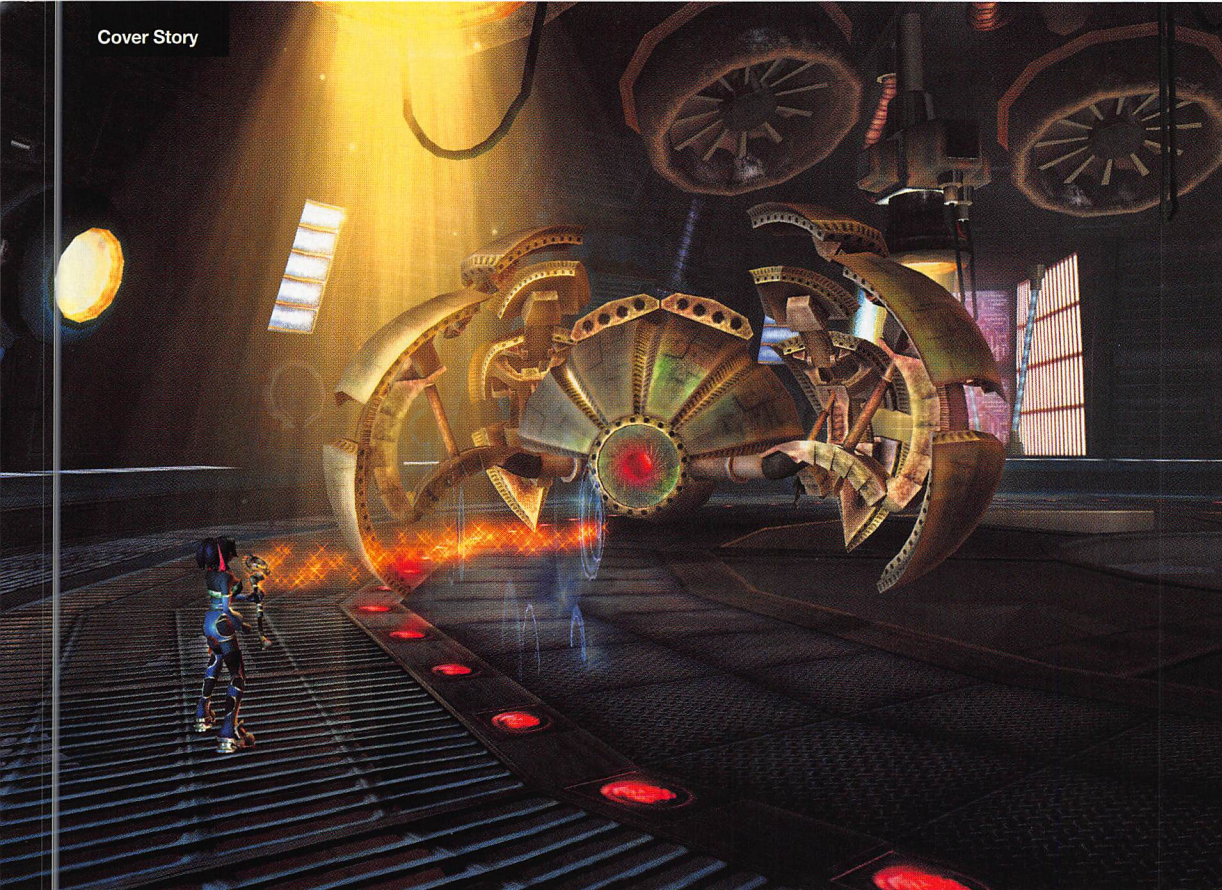
Expending time and polygons on epic fantasy

over repulsive violence is what gaming needs now more than ever, and Sudeki is a beacon of light for that noble yet struggling cause.

Dave Halverson

System: Xbox
Developer: Climax
Publisher: Microsoft (MGS)
Available: June

"...A GAME THAT
 CELEBRATES THE
 ACTUAL JOURNEY LIKE
 NO OTHER..."



“...SUDEKI’S BATTLES ARE BOTH A REFRESHING BREAK FROM THE TURN-BASED NORM AND A WONDER TO BEHOLD...”



BUKI

A female warrior from a small outpost of anthropomorphic tribesmen



TAL

A promising officer in the Elite Illumina Guard



All you need to know about Nassaria at this point is to fear her.

CLIMAX CREATIVE STAFF

The key players in the creation of Sudeki speak out for the first time on their individual triumphs and hurdles creating Microsoft's seminal action-RPG franchise...from scratch.



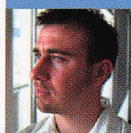
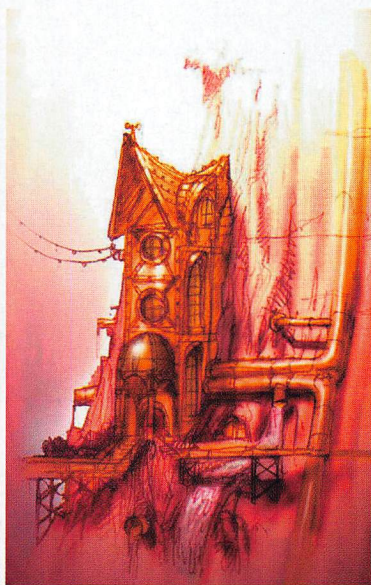
Game Director
Jason Avent

Arguably the most challenging of all genres, action-RPGs must get everything right in terms of feel/character physics, visibility/panoramas, model integrity, etc., for the game to really take hold. What sort of technology is behind Sudeki? Is this a proprietary engine? What were some of your biggest challenges and what are you most proud of now that it's nearing completion?

We have a very, very fast renderer. Our clever streaming technology allows us to have more graphics and sound in the game compared to the already sizeable 64MB of RAM that would normally be allowed. The biggest challenge has been getting the right mix of features in the game to make an RPG that will appeal to a console audience. It's a fast action game and has the depth that RPG gamers demand. The skill attacks and Spirit Strike spells in the game are truly beautiful. They chugged a bit during early development because they push the Xbox so hard. They're optimized now and are the pinnacle of the game.

Having four unique playable characters on screen and under your control was also tough for a variety of reasons. They each have unique combat and puzzle abilities that had to be implemented to work well together. When you're not directly controlling a player character, the AI has to take over and control them. It was a challenge to make them seem intelligent and back you up in combat. It works well though. And as a result, you never feel lonely in Sudeki!

It takes a village—in this case, one extremely talented village.



James Brace
Art Director

In creating a look for the world and the character design for Sudeki, were you influenced by the lineage of legendary action-RPGs from Square, Enix, Sega, etc.? Or did you just sit down and say, "Okay, how do we chart our own new course?" After all, character and world design is the front door to the game for consumers and, for something as potentially franchise-worthy as Sudeki, key in every facet of its success. I guess the

question is how does one go about birthing an epic first-party role-playing franchise to a console that's caught fire with hardcore gamers?

There's no simple answer for this question. The birth of Sudeki's art design was an organic process. It was a constant battle of creation, evaluation, appraising, focus testing and then re-creation. The road to success was mapped out through months of pre-production and development. Hanging onto the vision we conceptualized in 1999, the characters and worlds have been molded by the hands that built them and subsequently the influences of those people. The result is a unique style, influenced by anime yet originating from within the production team to provide a unique fusion of eastern and western art. I don't think any one person, including myself, can be credited for the style and design.

The biggest self-professed influences for our character concept artist are the work of well-known Japanese artists like Yoshitaka Amano (Final Fantasy series, Vampire Hunter D), Nobuteru Yuuki (of Escaflowne fame) and, more recently, the Korean artist Hyung-Tae Kim.

Fighting in amber waves of grain, Tal takes some dark knights to task...all real-time, this.



Tuomas Pirinen
Design

Turning art into reality with so much on screen must have been an exercise in give and take. How difficult was it to achieve an overall look so breathtaking, incorporating super-detailed structures with smooth character/creature models, top-quality effects and bump mapping?

It has been very, very difficult. From the beginning, we have worked hard to create extravagant graphics that contribute to the very organic look of the game. Many games build their art from ready-made "building blocks," but in Sudeki, everything you see is crafted by hand.

Would you say that technologically Sudeki is among the most elite Xbox games, in terms of its visuals? If so, what do you most attribute this to?

The rendering engine is easily one of the finest you are likely to see on Xbox. The success of the technology can simply be attributed to the people working on it, especially our enormously talented engine coder.

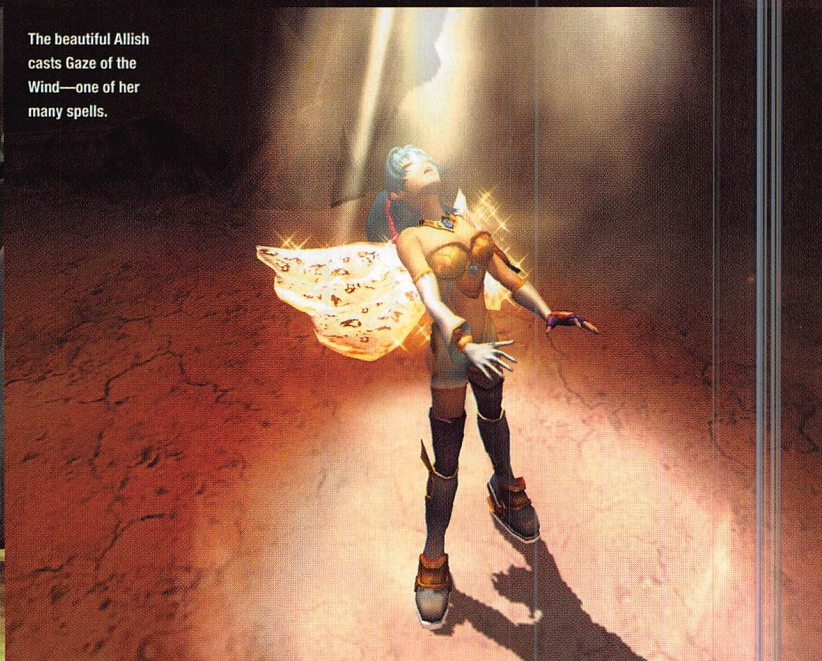




Elco	H	
Shel	J	
Buki	J	
Ailish	F	
300 HP		
80 SP		



The beautiful Ailish casts Gaze of the Wind—one of her many spells.





Tom Colvin
Audio Director

I don't need to tell you how important and pivotal music and sound effects are in an action-RPG of this magnitude. The wrong soundtrack can seriously hinder it while an epic score can fuel its success. As examples, ActRaiser for SNES, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and Phantasy Star Online evoke such ambience through audio, it heightens the experience many fold. Tell us how you went about scoring Sudeki and from where you drew your inspiration.

Since this is one of the first big RPGs made in the west, we felt it was important to give Sudeki an original and unique soundtrack. We wanted to have a soundtrack that was more than the sum of its parts, not simply a standard set of quasi-classical sounds that loops repetitively in the background. We created an interactive soundtrack that responds to the player's actions and attempts to convey a contemporary feel.

To this end, we have used a style of music production that draws heavily on dance music, utilizing breakbeats and electronic sounds as well as more traditional instruments, such as acoustic guitars, keyboards, strings, etc. We had to be conscious that we didn't allow these modern influences to detract from the game itself, of course—the last thing we wanted was for the player to feel like they were in some sort of fantasy role-playing nightclub! After a fair bit of experimentation, a balance was struck between the classic and the contemporary—traditional instrumentation offered reassuring use of melody and the modern dance influence allowed the music to be structured in a much more flexible manner. This method led to a score that

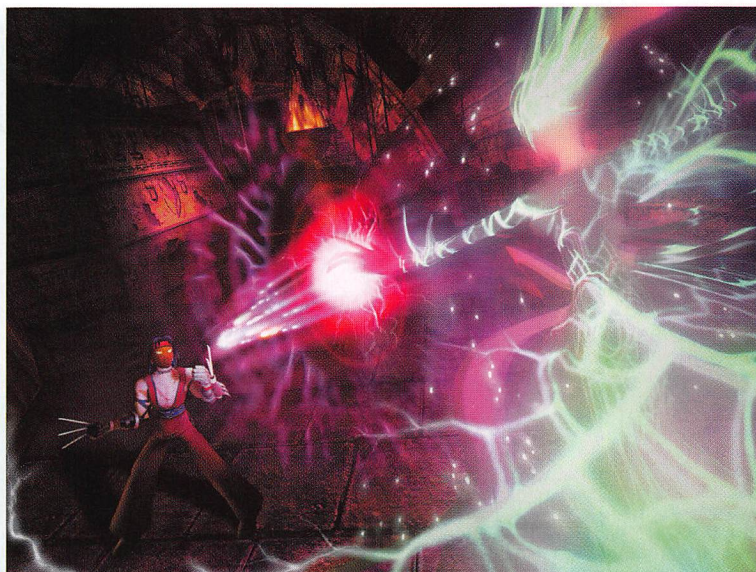
could change in harmony with actual events the player sees on screen. The result is a thoughtful score that reacts to in-game events quickly and unobtrusively, thus heightening the gameplay experience. Sound effects play a huge part in creating and maintaining atmosphere in the game. The sound effects remit makes up approximately 70 percent of the audio in the game. From the buzz of a beehive in the tranquil countryside to the alien roar of a demonic monster deep inside a dungeon, each weapon, monster and location have their own unique sound set. With such a variety of otherworldly creatures, spells and weapons in the game, we made great efforts to create new sound effects from scratch. We warped and twisted existing sounds as well as recorded much of the source material afresh in the studio. We hope the result will be a cohesive audio signature that will set Sudeki apart from games that have gone before.



Andrew Flavell
Tech Design, Microsoft

Sudeki is a game that grabbed me with the very first screenshots much the way Altered Beast did back when Sega ushered in the 16-bit era, which I attribute to two things: Allish and the incredible architecture at work. It looks like it would all move at about 7 fps, yet you're locking it at 30. How were you able to incorporate so much detail into this world and retain 30 fps?

The graphics engine for Sudeki was written from the ground up to harness the power of the Xbox, and Climax has worked hard to push the graphics chip to its limits. Much of the static geometry in the world is rendered



Revealed here for the first time: dark Tal, known as Talos. The dark reflections of the main characters are playable in the alternate realm!

using pre-compiled push buffers, which offload work from the CPU and onto the GPU. This enables systems such as AI, collision and physics more time. As a result, these systems can be made more sophisticated. The completely dynamic hardware shadow buffers allow real-time shadows in very complex environments. As an example, walking under trees with thousands of leaves, the shadows look awesome because they have none of the usual blocky pixels that many shadow systems suffer from. The overall effect is that they add a huge amount to the immersion that you feel when playing the game. Almost everything is rendered with multiple textures and/or bump maps, multiple light sources and complex geometry. This is all possible through very sophisticated vertex and pixel shaders that are really only achievable on Xbox.



Peter Connelly
Producer, Microsoft

So Peter, I take it you're the guy in charge of making sure all the pieces of the Sudeki puzzle come together—between art, control, cinemas, flow, etc., a daunting task given the breadth of this game. Tell us about your role and the challenges of realizing a vision as grand as Sudeki.

My role as the external producer is to facilitate between the many and varied functional roles needed to make a title like this possible. It can be fairly scary when you start to think about the sheer amount of stuff involved: reams of code, massive numbers of assets and the complexity tying it all together. I suppose that's the hallmark of creating any action-RPG. You can get overloaded with the details, where the devil always lives, and

quickly start to despair the challenge.

However, within Climax, I have a great bunch of people to lead each area and a great set of people within those teams to get the actual game finished. At Microsoft, I have people behind me for each functional area such as graphics, audio and design. MGS provides fantastic development, test, usability, marketing and localization support. These areas and many more are what really get the game done. It really is the effort of many people that make it possible; I try to get them all in line...it's interesting to say the least.

So I will do whatever I can to support the key groups of people in getting their jobs done. Overall, I work at moving the beast forward. I am the Microsoft liaison for [Climax's] Solent studio and I provide Microsoft with the window into the development efforts at Climax. I will do most anything...and some things I shouldn't. Sometimes this means working on scheduling with my Climax counterparts to get the myriad of pieces of the development puzzle moving in the same direction. Sometimes just ordering food and collecting pizzas to keep people going after the sun dies down. I'll organize a fleet of thespians for the voiceover work. I have even found myself stuck high up a ladder in a nightclub hanging posters of the main characters for a press event.

Realizing the vision is a collective endeavor. Climax has a game director, producer and design leads to guide the ship, and I try to move ahead clearing obstacles or spotting further issues that might rear their ugly heads. It's a multifaceted role, but it's really cool to work with great talent on a great product. It's been difficult at times, but the light at the end of the tunnel is getting bright these days, and I'm now certain it is not an oncoming train.



Red Ninja

End of Honor

Beware the wrath of a female ninja

紅 KURENAI
 2003, 03, 29, D, K



Created by newly formed Japanese developer Tranji, a spin-off from Opus and New Corporation, Red Ninja: End of Honor is one of the more creative takes on action in quite some time. Drawing from their experience with making fishing games (Fishing Master Online is coming stateside soon), the team has taken the concept of casting a line in a deadly new direction.

In this adventurous title set against a backdrop of 16th-century Japan, the primary mode of attack is called the Tetsugen, or "wire weapon." Paper-thin and upgraded with nasty head attachments, the Tetsugen latches onto its victims, ripping them apart at the head, torso or feet. The results are messy: fallen bodies crawl with their feet severed, trailing blood; with enough force, a victim can be spun like a top and ripped apart; when heads roll, they exhibit physics, bouncing around with a swift kick.

Bringing the pain is a delicate female ninja known as Kurenai, who escaped death by hanging when a rival

clan killed her father while raiding his shop. Scarred by the life-altering event and eternally loyal to the clan who eventually took her in, Kurenai vows to destroy every single life even remotely tied to the massacre. Her upper hand is dealt in the combined mastery of stealth, aggression, agile wall-running, platforming and the use of several types of weapons, including blowguns, smoke bombs and rocket explosives... And "seduction"?

While the Tetsugen is a most effective instrument for death, its uses are many. Kurenai can cast it like a grappling hook, swinging across ravines and onto hard-to-reach ledges, and she can even rappel, hanging silently over the enemy for the kill. The approaching guards are aware of noise as much as movement; alert the wrong type of enemy and he'll call for help. Take out the leader and the rest may flee in terror. And while I haven't witnessed this myself, a focus is being placed on investing the enemies with the sense to call on situational reinforcements: maybe archers

if you, say, alert a passerby and choose a wall-run to flee.

Don't for a second think of Red Ninja as a Shinobi knockoff. There's much more meat on the table, with a good emphasis on storytelling. Japanese director Shinsuke Sato, of *Princess Blade* fame, expanded the backstory to approach deep characterization within the visual fiction of the world, as well as served as the director of the cutscenes.

There doesn't initially seem to be that glossy modern-world style to Red Ninja that's taking over the industry. A traditional look and feel would seem to be where Tranji are taking their designs. The setting and original, involved gameplay are, at the very least, a great start. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

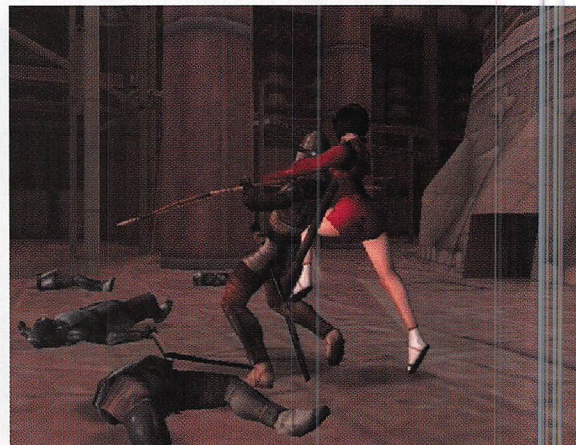
Developer: Tranji

Publisher: VU Games

Available: Fall 2004

The tighter, indoor environments you see here are contrasted by open outdoor areas.

"The results are messy: fallen bodies crawl with their feet severed, trailing blood..."



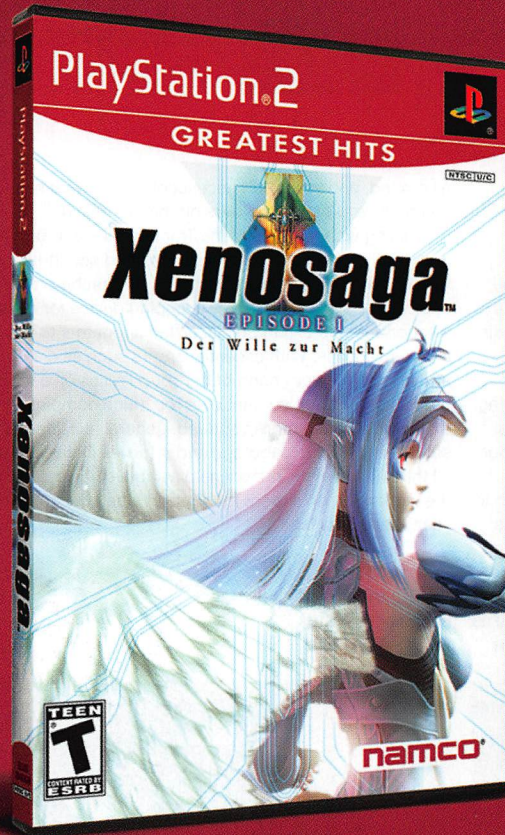
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~Official PlayStation Magazine, 4 out of 5



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"...Xenosaga is to video games as the original Star Wars is to movies."

~GMR, 9 out of 10

"Xenosaga is truly a triple-A title..."

~Game Informer, 9.75 out of 10

"Calling this game epic would be an understatement."

~IGN

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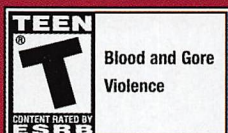
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PlayStation®2

Star Wars Republic Commando

The Star Wars game machine marches on with first-person squad-based action

For all those still waiting for the day when the Star Wars wellspring will produce a proper first-person action experience—this theme is perfect for the genre!—may I present to you *Star Wars: Republic Commando*. Set against a newly imagined backdrop drawn from the events surrounding the Clone Wars, the game reaches into a darker territory, focusing its conflict in eight major environments, including the planet Geonosis, where the climactic battle occurred in *Attack of the Clones*, the thickly foliaged Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk and the claustrophobic compartments of an overrun Republic ship. Playing the part of an exceptionally trained soldier in the Republic forces, existing somewhere between the events in Episodes II and III, your central mission is to deal with the ongoing threats of the Sith.

Following the lead of the ever-popular squad-based approach to combat, *Republic Commando* requires more of your trigger skills than simply aiming and firing. You've got a team of three to worry about, calling on their added support in the heat of battle with the guidance of your weapon reticle. But while your personal soldier may be the leader of the group, the adventure does not paint you as the solitary hero out to take down an entire army. Chaos happens

all around, and you won't necessarily know what's going on until you receive expanding orders on the battlefield.

Dealing with the likes of the Trandoshans and battle droids apparently requires primary weapons and secondary weapons, which your soldier can manipulate with attachments; a simple rifle can very quickly become a sniping device for quieter kills, a secondary pistol can be discarded altogether for anything an enemy drops. With essential orders such as disarm, secure and attack, the command of the squad relies on a staple setup, choosing swift deployment over too much complexity. Mixing the explosive with the more subdued, general missions range from search-and-kills to sabotage and retrieval. Details on exactly how all this will translate into online play above basic deathmatch are in the works, but do expect full support when the game hits late this year. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: LucasArts
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: Fall 2004



"...Republic Commando requires more of your trigger skills than simply aiming and firing."

Star Wars games aren't normally so dark and bleak. Nice to see for a change.



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Red Dead Revolver

Welcome to the bloody Wild Wild West, Rockstar style

Just because the spirited Wild West theme is completely ignored by game designers doesn't mean there aren't countless riches waiting there to be mined. Rockstar San Diego agree as they near the end of a long and winding development path called Red Dead Revolver.

Here we have the video game Western as you might initially expect: all action, all fiction and all the shotgun-, rifle- and pistol-popping death scenes you can create before every last shell is smoking on the blood-soaked dirt. In total, you actually get over 30 authentic weapons in your arsenal. There's a faithful horse in there too, and the ability to kill with both hands blasting while a third throwing weapon—dynamite always the trusty standby—waits readily by your side.

All the killing is, of course, justifiable and understandable when you're Red Harlow, a beleaguered frontiersman who watched his family get slaughtered by a group of bandits chasing after their claim. As the murderers

leave the area in ruin, Red attempts to grab a pistol cooking in a fire, leaving him indelibly branded with a scar.

Years later, revenge. When the game leaves the expanse of the towns and prairies and heads indoors, the mood definitely isn't sunny, fed by dusky saloons and candle-lit halls. Cutscenes are being worked on to fill in the cinematic intentions of the storytelling, punctuated with a colder humor and tone that sits more on the adult side of the line.

The game is definitely reaching to bring out more of an appealing edge compared to when production began more than three years ago in the Capcom stable. For Red Dead Revolver, change is looking very good.

Brady Flechter

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Rockstar San Diego
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: Spring 2004

"All the killing is, of course, justifiable and understandable when you're Red Harlow..."



The game's sharper look and feel better compliment the Western setting.



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Monster Hunter

A prehistoric, online battle for survival

In the beautiful prehistoric world of *Monster Hunter*, giant beasts roam freely. Amidst the lush forests, rolling plains, craggy mountains and harsh deserts, dinosaur-like monsters exert their power, constantly a threat to the early human civilization. The rule of the land is "survival of the fittest"—a simple premise for what appears to be a fairly deep online action game.

At its core, the game—which can be played offline solo or online with up to four players—is all about action. Gameplay is made up of quests that take place throughout the finely detailed gamescape, ranging from defeating certain monsters to obtaining specific items to defending a village, but virtually all of them involve battling massive monsters using a variety of tactics. Instead of just fighting monsters head-on, teams can strategize, with some players setting pitfall traps or bombs while others lure the monsters into them.

According to producer Kenji Itsuno, the creatures have realistic behavior patterns for the player to exploit. "The way that they get angry, the way that they drink water, the way they move around...each monster has its own special movements and its own special personality. The trick to defeating these guys...is understanding these personalities for each monster," Itsuno says.

Another distinct aspect of *Monster Hunter* is customization. Aside from creating their character's appearance, players also get to determine the way their character plays through the weapon they use. There are no character classes in *Monster Hunter*, but the type of weapon you use determines your abilities. For example, though there is no magic per se, by properly equipping a gun-type weapon, players can use stun shots or healing shots.

Furthermore, both weapons and armor can be upgraded by obtaining natural items from the environment, such as ore mined from a mountaintop or skin taken from a defeated

monster. "If you've got the money and you've got the materials then you can go quite far the way you customize these," explains Itsuno. "With just this normal sword, you can mix in monsters' fangs and claws and make this big, massive, beast-master demon-slayer weapon of death." Players can even cut plants to make medicinal herbs or catch fish for food—the scope seems vast.

"The goal of the game, that's what I'd like you guys to find," remarks Itsuno. "It's really up to you, you the player. It's up to you to decide what the goal is, so you're very free. It's a very free game." **Chris Hoffman**

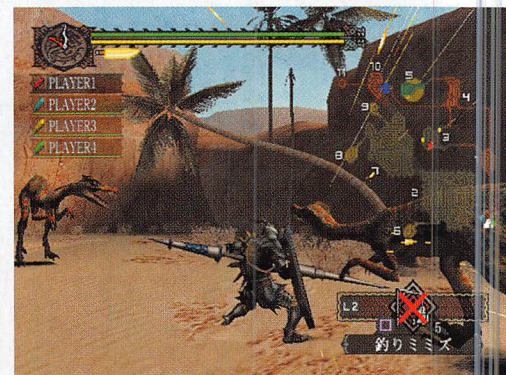
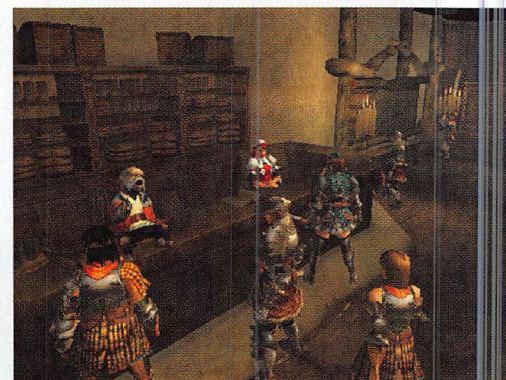
System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Capcom Production Studio 7

Publisher: Capcom

Available: Fall

"...virtually all of them involve battling massive monsters using a variety of tactics."



The Wyverns in *Monster Hunter* are among the fiercest creatures in the game.



The Star Wars license will probably fuel success for LucasArts for years to come, but there's so much more to be said for works of completely new imagination; give me the classically tuned, off-kilter fun of Armed and Dangerous over anything Lucas has provided from the Star Wars assembly line.

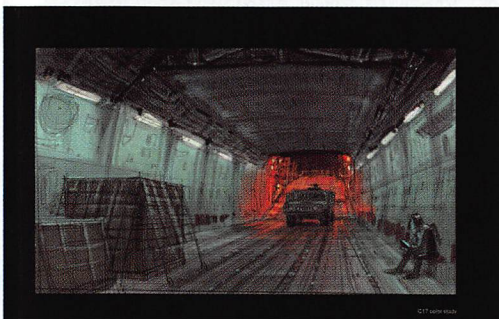
Up next is *Mercenaries*, a third-person combat action game that places an emphasis on entirely open-ended gameplay. The idea is to give you total creative freedom over how you approach hotspots on the battlefield, establishing interactivity with everything around you: if it's in your line of sight, it's free for the taking—or destroying. How you see fit in using it is entirely up to you and the situation at hand.

The setup plays off military action, with the source of conflict sparked between North Korea, the Russian Mafia and the United Nations. You're free to choose sides, forming allegiances through the actions of one of three mercenaries: a male Swede or American or a female British operative. There's much more to your pick than a mere change of uniform; each character carries some sort of distinct advantage that you may find more tailored to your strategy on the battlefield.

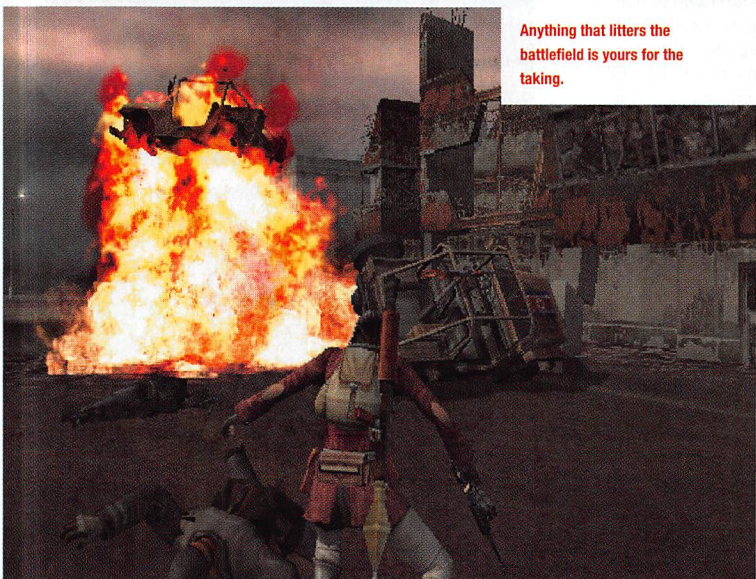
Mercenaries' presentation involves an interesting aspect called the “deck of 52,” which represents the total number of central missions, capped off with the capture of the Ace of Spades. Each card is a primary target; before taking the final prize, a face card must be secured that represents each suit. The implications behind this curious system are being worked out—game's quite early—but at the very least it's a fun idea.

Needing a lot less explanation is the durable fun of annihilating stuff—jump aboard 20 authentic military-grade vehicles, from helicopters and airplanes to artillery rocket launchers and heavy tanks, and arm your multitasking soldier with such goodies as shotguns, grenades and rifles. When the scene boils over, end it all with the horrific power of a well-placed air strike. The game may be set in the future, concerning a coup of North Korea, but don't expect a big fantasy element involved with your firepower and general abilities. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Pandemic Studios
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: Fall



“...jump aboard 20 authentic military-grade vehicles, from helicopters and airplanes to artillery rocket launchers and heavy tanks...”



Anything that litters the battlefield is yours for the taking.



Hitman

Contracts

Getting paid for murder

Most kids dream of becoming an astronaut or professional athlete when they grow up. Agent 47 got a bit sidetracked along the way to his dreams, settling for life as a hitman. Basically, the guy splatters brains for bucks.

Hitman: Contracts is the third chapter in the story of Agent 47, detailing the contract killer's sad past through extended flashbacks. It all begins as 47, languishing in a drab Paris hotel room, doped up to kill the pain, ruminates on a major hit gone wrong. As he hallucinates and comes in and out of consciousness, missions manifest from the recollections of his nightmares.

What a fantastic premise this is! For the first two adventures, the psychology behind Agent 47's methods took a back seat to the visceral killing. Not here: series veterans IO Interactive intend to explore the serious complexities driving the warped mind of killer for hire. So often we take safe, meaningless control of immense scenes of violence; how important, how intriguing to finally face the possibility of game that looks inside the emotion of that violence. It's time for the art of gamemaking to move forward.

In the words of IO Interactive, Hitman: Contracts will be "highly disturbing." From what I've played so far, I'm not going to argue—yet disturbing does not lazily rely on the graphic (and again, more hope resides in a depth of storytelling for effect). Yes, blood streaks the walls and floors after a kill; scenes of convincing death and despair

are not uncommon. But the impressively distinct mood of the game further decorates the dark stage—shadowy, quiet and a bit surreal. It's all even a little beautiful at times.

The previous adventure offered more aggressive action as a way to clear a path and make the major hit. Contracts is going for a somewhat subdued, thinking-man's approach to enemy disposal, offering Agent 47 more options within the world and forcing him to fully utilize his robust skill set. It can be tempting to pull out the silencer and simply aim and shoot, but with increased enemy intelligence in this latest Hitman to track the outcome of your decisions, there might be a much better approach: lure the enemy into a private room, lace his food, choke him out or simply avoid altogether and concentrate on the bigger fish; shoot up close, find a place to snipe, plant a bomb and wait. The way you do it is up to you, as long as the job is completed with minimal consequence.

A game like Hitman: Contracts sounds superb on paper—to me, one of the most appealing concepts for a game. A lot of these ideas have already been given impressive form. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: IO Interactive

Publisher: Eidos

Available: Summer

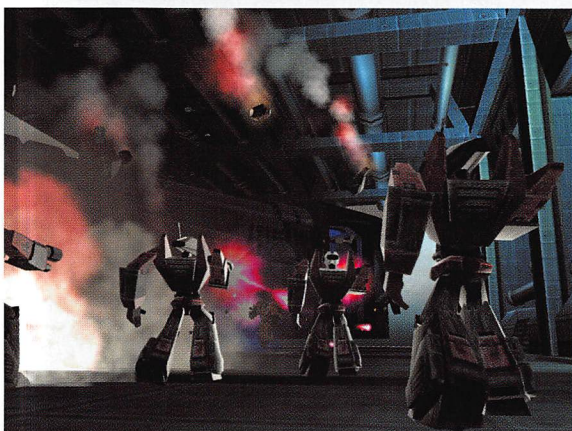
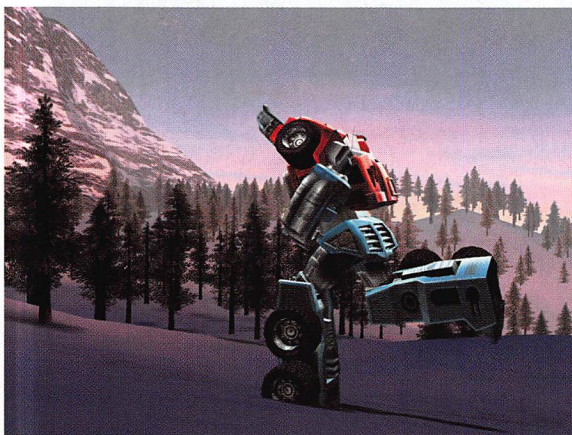
Heavy lighting isn't just for mood; shatter a fixture and enemy fire becomes sporadic.

"Yes, blood streaks the walls and floors after a kill; scenes of convincing death and despair are not uncommon."



Transformers

There truly is more to this game than meets the eye



Atari's Transformers (formerly Transformers Armada: Prelude to Energon) is more than just a game boasting a popular license. The toy- and cartoon-based elements are all present—the war between the heroic Autobots and evil Decepticons, authentic cartoon voice actors, characters like Optimus Prime, Megatron and Starscream—but there's more substance than that. Beneath all the big-brand gloss is a title that's shaping up to be a hardcore action-shooter with substantial challenge.

Producer Jon Chmura elaborates: "While creating our Transformers game, we had to keep in mind that this was also being created for the core-gaming PS2 fans. We hope that Transformers fans will love the game, but we also designed it to reach out to the much wider PS2 gaming audience."

Dual-analog FPS-like controls serve as the basis for Transformers' action; charge and strafe with the left stick, turn and target with the right. Choose one of three Autobots—Optimus, Hot Shot or Red Alert—each with varying levels of strength, defense, power and speed, then soothe your itchy trigger finger by blowing the Decepticons' Decepticlone army into shrapnel.

"[The Decepticlones] were created specifically for our game, and do not exist in any Hasbro content," explains Chmura. "We realized that the game we were creating needed to have plenty of 'cannon fodder,' and, because of this, we created this army that is the strength of Megatron's forces throughout the game."

Cannon fodder or not, the Decepticlones' AI is highly advanced, using team tactics, remarkable accuracy and good use of cover to coordinate their assault. The Autobots, however, have some tricks of their own. By finding Mini-Cons hidden throughout

the game, the Autobots can augment their stats or gain new weapons. Equip one Mini-con for homing missiles, another for a sniper scope, another for proximity mines. Some even grant new abilities, such as gliding or a high jump, permitting further exploration of the vast reaches of each level.

The expansive, organic environments are among Transformers' most impressive features. "We have a really strong technology group in our Melbourne House studio that has focused on developing our 3-D technology, specifically focusing their talents on the PS2 platform," Chmura states. "Most notably for Transformers, they designed an environmental technology system called 'Eco-system' that displays the countless numbers of trees, dense vegetation and grass that help make many of Transformers' environments look so unique."

Not all the levels take place in natural wilderness. One of the most noteworthy stages would have to be the invasion of the massive Decepticon aircraft carrier Tidal Wave...which then transforms into terrifyingly enormous robotic form. Additionally, a trip to the Transformer homeworld of Cybertron is on the itinerary, where the Autobots will fight an even bigger, hungrier foe.

Toss in tons of unlockable bonus content and authentic licensed tie-ins (some of the dialogue even pays homage to Transformers: The Movie), and Transformers becomes reason to get excited for Transfans and hardcore gamers alike. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Melbourne House
Publisher: Atari
Available: May

"...soothe your itchy trigger finger by blowing the Decepticons' Decepticlone army into shrapnel."

Tidal Wave: huge, imposing
 and ready to smash Hot
 Shot to bits.



Shadow of ROME

Capcom's bloody, historical take on gaming emerges from the shadows

Keiji Inafune is a student of history. His hit Onimusha series played out amidst the warring states period of Japan, and his newest endeavor, *Shadow of Rome*, is set in one of the greatest eras of western civilization. More specifically, the game takes place in the Republic of Rome, 44 BC, and is loosely based around the events surrounding the murder of Julius Caesar.

"I think that is what makes games fun," proclaims Inafune. "You don't want to go 100 percent nonfiction 'cause then you know what's going to happen at the end. You don't want to go 100 percent fiction because then it's kind of too far away from reality. Doing it this way, it's kind of a piece of art. It can teach us about history while yet still being fun as a game."

The main character in *Shadow of Rome* is Agrippa, a Roman soldier whose father, Uesnius, is accused of Caesar's murder. In order to save Uesnius, Agrippa enters gladiatorial combat as part of a plan to rescue him from his unjust fate. The bloody spectacles that follow will pit Agrippa against savage beasts and armies of attackers, put him in to-the-death battle royals and place him in violent chariot races. An arsenal of weapons—including axes, swords, morning stars, spears and spiked clubs—can be taken from fallen foes, and even instruments like catapults come into play. True to the nature of gladiatorial combat, limbs will fly, heads will be severed and bodies will be cleft in half as the crowds cheer.

Inafune states that such violence is only natural in a game based in this historical context. "There were bloody battles; they fought to the death," he explains. "That kind of blood coming out, being bloody, being violent, being gross, all those things are natural for a gladiator game."

However, not all of *Shadow of Rome* is about senseless bloodshed. The other half of the game focuses on adventure and stealth as players assume the role of Agrippa's friend, Octavius, who has gone undercover to discover who Caesar's true killer is. Octavius will have to use environmental objects to knock out guards

and will be able to change into enemy uniforms to further conceal himself. Another character, a female gladiator named Claudia, will also play a role in the quest.

"Actually, this game itself is a macho game," Inafune states. "It's full of a bunch of macho men fighting other macho men, beating each other down. But whether it's Europe, whether it's America, whether it's Japan, every guy likes to have a chick in the game somewhere. There has to be a female in it. So, this is the female. And she will, at one point, rescue him."

With its basis in western history and heavy emphasis on violent action, *Shadow of Rome* is being designed specifically for players in America and Europe—in fact, no Japanese release is currently planned. SOR is still early in development; hopefully when it's done, the western audience will be immersed in fantastic gameplay as well.

Chris Hoffman

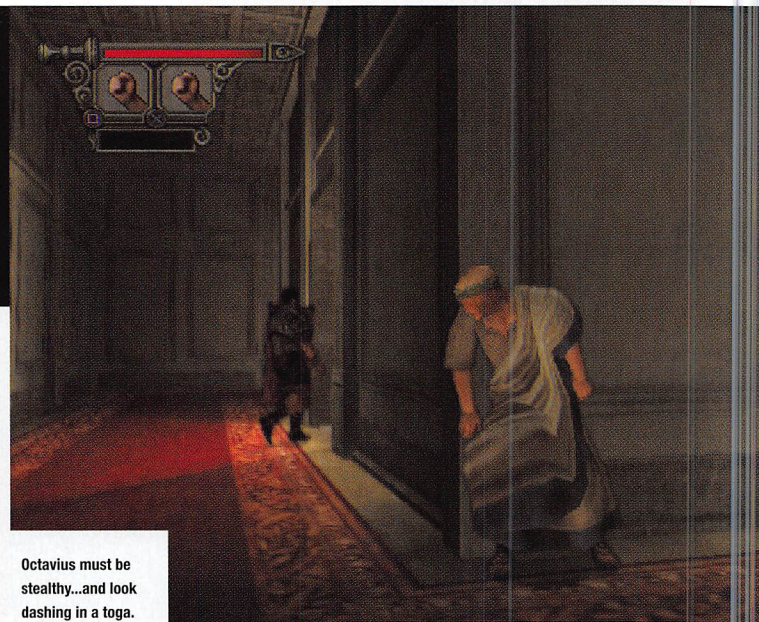
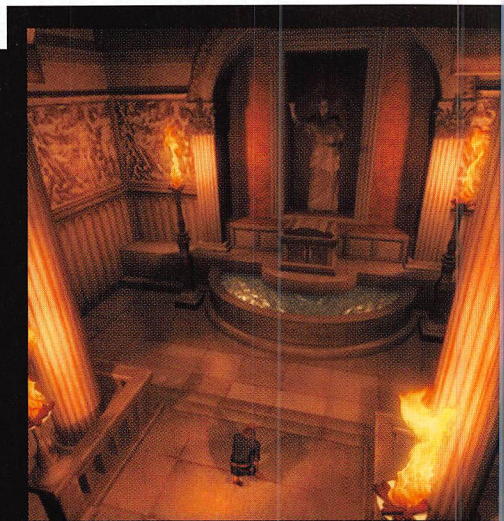
System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Capcom Production Studio 2

Publisher: Capcom

Available: Winter 2004

"...heads will be severed and bodies will be cleft in half as the crowds cheer."



Octavius must be stealthy...and look dashing in a toga.



Shadow Ops: Red Mercury

system: xbox, pc / developer: zombie / publisher: atari / available: summer

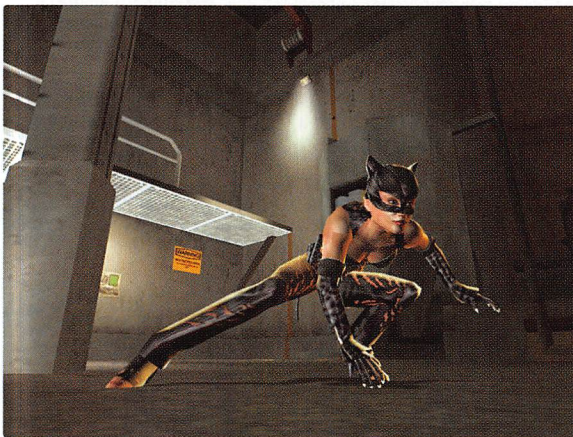
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury is slowly becoming one of my most anticipated games of the summer. This first-person shooter certainly looks good, but just wait till you hear it in action: sound is being created by Soundelux, the Hollywood studio that worked on films including the award-winning *Black Hawk Down* and *Kill Bill*. Motion-capture sessions were performed by actual elite special force members, bringing an additional feel of authenticity that the designers are reaching for. Production values are obviously paramount for what is being billed as a "cinematic shooter." -BF



Burnout 3

system: ps2, xbox / developer: criterion games / publisher: ea / available: september

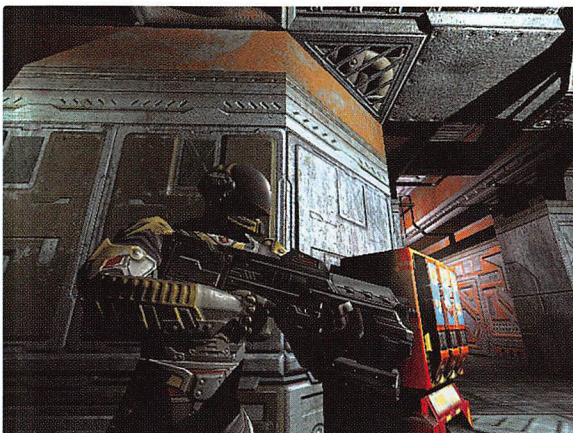
Burnout has gained a respectable following since its introduction in 2001, and this sequel maintains everything fans will want and a good deal more. The arcade racing takes place in the densely trafficked city streets and beyond, often with the competition heading straight into oncoming vehicles. Crashes are supposed to occur, and rewards are handed out based on the insanity of your driving skills—call it the "crash and burn" system. Both crash and race modes will support multiplayer competition. -BF



Catwoman

system: ps2, xbox, gc / developer: ea / publisher: ea / available: july

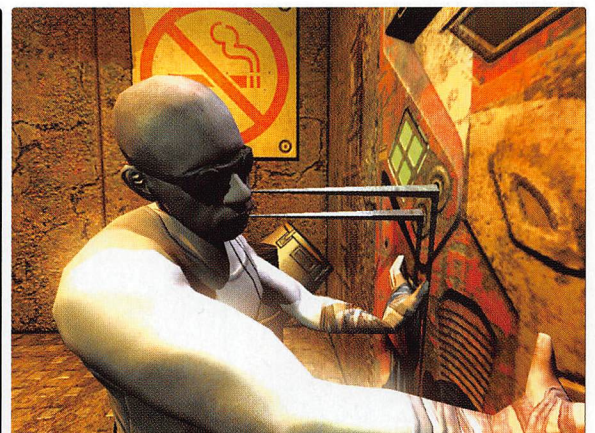
As if defiling the Catwoman credo with the single most retarded getup since Fartman wasn't enough, now they're going to make us prance around in it. Halle Berry kicking ass in high heels and a Britney Spears video costume may look sexy, but if she intends on doing any acrobatics in those heels...best have them reinforced; looks like she does a lot of kicking in the game, so they're good for something. Even even if the movie blows, given what EA has done with Bond (although this is the Potter team), the game could still be great. Better clean up those models though—that security guard's got a nasty hemorrhoid. -DH



Riddick

system: xbox / developer: starbreeze / publisher: vu games / available: summer

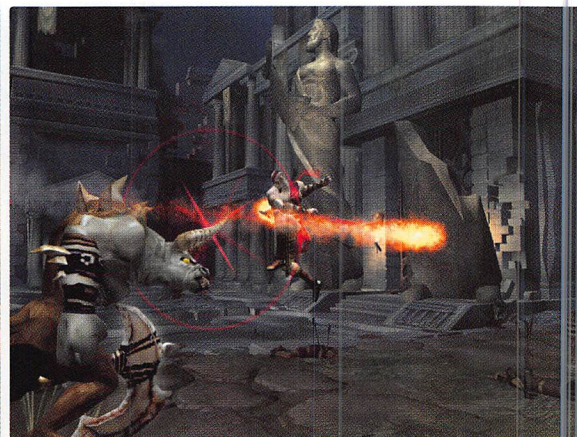
Holy crap, this one looks good! Presented as a prequel to *Pitch Black* and the upcoming *Chronicles of Riddick*, this action-stealth adventure could be among the more groundbreaking exclusive titles on Xbox this summer. Incredible visual support comes from all sorts of technology—normal-mapping, ragdoll, per-pixel shading/dynamic lighting and a handful of other invaluable touches that are being touted in such games as *Doom 3*, *Halo 2* and *Half-Life 2*. The person bringing the pain is Riddick himself, whose life up to his introduction in *Pitch Black* is being detailed in the backstory. -BF



God of War

system: ps2 / developer: scea / publisher: scea / available: q1 2005

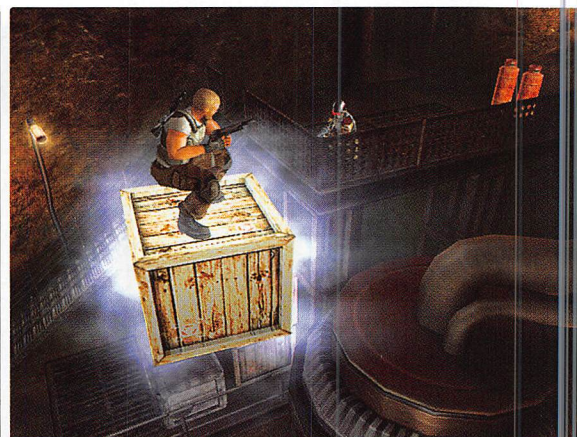
The director that brought us Twisted Metal Black has been toiling away at an action-adventure franchise that looks like every Chakan fan's wet dream. The central character in God of War: a massive, ripped, purple-ish demon who commits truly unholy acts of carnage on his prey, including aerial assaults and bone-snapping acts of pain that threaten to rumble the knobs of your Dual Shock; nothing like ramming cold, jagged steel into a minotaur's gaping maw. Careening through massive, painstakingly assembled regions, solving Rygar-like puzzles, God of War looks like it could be the next big thing to hit action-adventure gaming...hard. -DH



Psi Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy

system: ps2, xbox / developer: midway / publisher: midway / available: summer

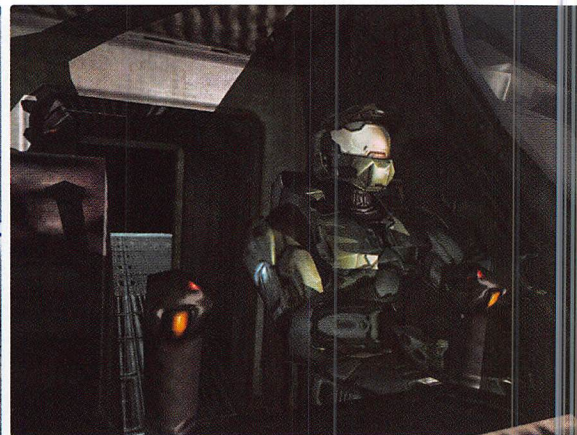
Previously called ESPionage, the newly named Psi Ops takes place in the near future, where technology dominates the way of life. Combating a band of terrorists bent on sabotaging the current world order, your missions involve the familiar use of firearms and brutal third-person combat. But the big hook here is the use of psi powers—mental energy focused for multiple forms of attack against the patrolling super-soldiers: take over the mind on an enemy and walk him to his death with Mind Control; toss them like rag dolls with Telekinesis; burn them to the ground with Pyrokinesis. -BF



Halo 2

system: xbox / developer: bungie / publisher: microsoft / available: fall

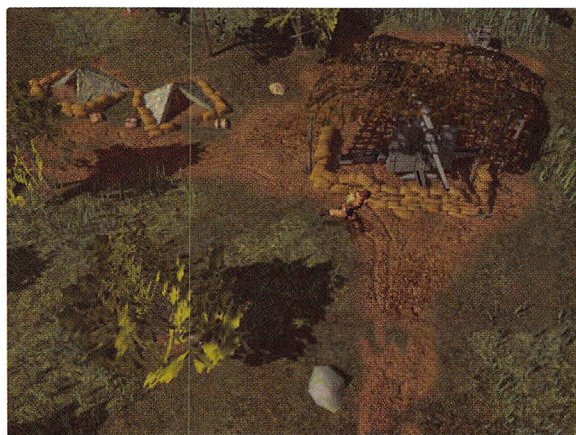
Lots to report on Halo 2...like... Wow! Look at this new screen every press outlet in America got! How great is this? A new screenshot! Thank you, oh, thank you! Would it really have killed them to grab a few more screens? Anyway, here it is...again. Someday we'll all lay hands on this game and probably fall into some kind of Halo 2 gaming coma. Hopefully it'll come with a control pad deactivation device so we don't all waste away on our sofas. But what a way to go, eh? -DH



Combat Elite: WWII Paratroopers

system: ps2, xbox / developer: battleborne / publisher: acclaim / available: june

Launching on the 60th anniversary of D-Day, Combat Elite: WWII Paratroopers takes you through battle-torn scenes depicting the horrible destruction of that storied time in history. Built on the Snowblind engine, which powers Baldur's Gate and Fallout, the top-down action is familiar but freshly spun with the compelling locations surrounding such battle hotspots as D-Day, Operation Market Garden and Bastogne. The combat is intuitive and focused on speed of play, with an emphasis on character advancements through the ranks. Take on the full 40-level campaign with the added support of a friend in two-player. -BF



Ratchet and Clank III

system: ps2 / developer: insomniac / publisher: scea / available: fall

Ratchet and Clank: Going Commando innovated enormously over the original Ratchet, showcasing exactly how to make a sequel the right way. Insomniac has a huge task ahead if they intend to make the same strides with this next and likely last (at least Insomniac-made) sequel in one of my favorite series. Returning are Ratchet and Clank, who will call on many

of the same skillsets as before, with the same emphasis on weapons strategy and experience growth. The engine is being recycled again, but a new turn to the darker side of things is in the works—a change that will be quite welcome now that we're entering the third stretch of the adventure. No doubt Insomniac will pull off another top-shelf effort. *-BF*

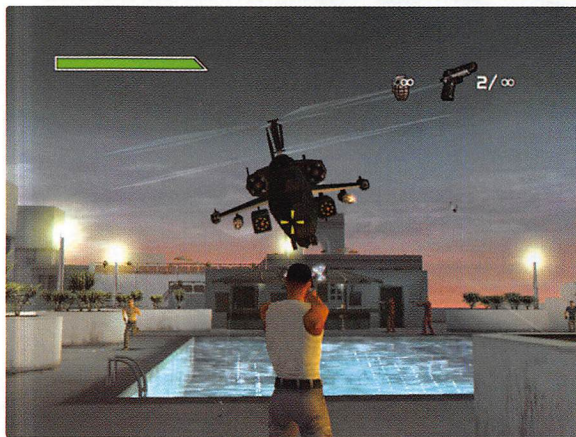


Jak III

system: ps2 / developer: naughty dog / publisher: scea / available: october

Little is known about Jak III other than it takes place a year after the conclusion of Jak II, in a very different version of Haven City, undoubtedly changed as a result of Jak's (and let's not forget Dexter's) fine work laying the evil Baron Praxis to rest. Whether he's gotten the dark eco out of his system or not remains to be seen, along with if

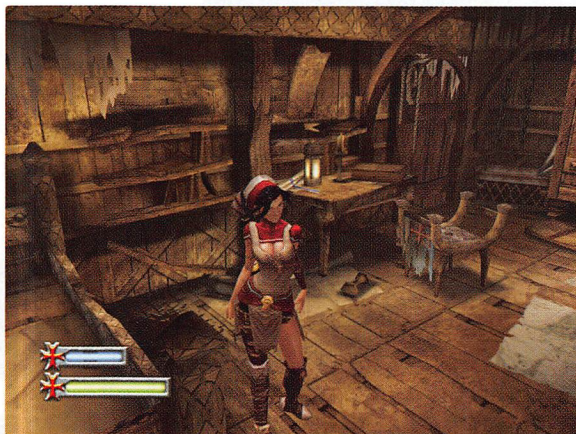
he got the girl...either girl—Keira or the smoking-hot (for an alien) Ashlin. My wish list includes her as a playable character along with Jak's old hair, sans the chin nub. *-DH*



Bad Boys II

system: ps2, xbox, gc / developer: blitz games / publisher: empire / available: april

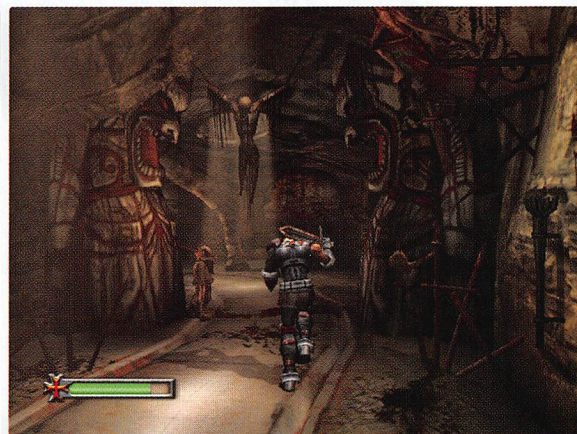
Please, don't do drugs, but do check out this third- and first-person action title where the real you will join the polygonal Will Smith and Martin Lawrence to stop the flow of designer ecstasy into Miami. When the situation requires heavy, wanton gunfire, the Mike character is your boy, and when subtlety and the now-requisite stealth may be in order, it's Marcus all the way. Where you are in the plot of the game determines which character you can use. A ranking system judges how discriminating you are with the firepower, assigning maverick players a Bad Boy rating. *-BF*



The Plague of Darkness

system: ps2, xbox / developer: widescreen games / publisher: namco / available: fall 2004

I am now officially excited about Namco's mature action-RPG, The Plague of Darkness, due to the awesomeness of this female character and the promise of more obstacles and traps. Spread over eight settings and 58 sub-locations, the name of the game in The Plague is to solve the mystery of the pestilence and save the citizens of medieval Europe from a gruesome death. Doing so will involve a series of evolving play mechanics using swords, crossbows, daggers and other instruments of pain as you square off against a multitude of enemies while fending off the Black Death itself. *-DH*







The Best Damn Mega Man Feature Period

We go straight to the source at Capcom to learn about the past, present and future of one of the true icons of video gaming

by Chris Hoffman

Mega Man. Rockman. The Blue Bomber. Rocky Light. Whatever you call him, there's no denying that Capcom's blue-clad, weapon-swiping hero is one of the most significant, long-lived characters in all of video games.

Mega Man had a banner year in 2003, celebrating his 15th birthday (well, since his first game hit Japan in December 1987, 2002 was technically when the partying began) and enjoying the spotlight in toys, comic books, a TV series and no fewer than five distinct games spanning the PlayStation 2, GameCube and Game Boy Advance.

As productive as Mega Man's 15th year was, sweet 16 looks to be even better, thanks in no small part to Mega Man Anniversary Collection, coming to PS2, GC and GBA. (The GBA version, formerly known as Mega Man Mania, contains Mega Man's five classic Game Boy titles.) These anthology titles will take players back through Mega Man's history, letting fans re-experience where it all began and introducing new players to Mega Man's origins. Amazingly, these compilations represent only a fraction of Mega Man's legacy—there have been nearly 40 Mega Man titles released in the U.S. alone.

"The Mega Man series of games, along with Street Fighter, are quite literally the foundation that Capcom is built upon," says Todd Thorson, Capcom's marketing director. "Through Capcom's entire history, there has always been a Mega Man game as part of the incredible line-up. No other character has had that kind of longevity."

Despite the long and rich history the character has had, Mega Man's career began quite humbly. Capcom, primarily an arcade game developer at the time, conceived of a plan in the mid-1980s to create a new game specifically for the home gaming

market; previous Capcom games on Nintendo's fledgling Famicom system had all been ports of arcade titles. In order to make the project the best it could be, Capcom assigned some of their most talented young developers to the project, among them an artist by the name of Keiji Inafune, now the general manager and head of Capcom's Production Studio 2.

"I initially joined the Street Fighter team," explains Inafune, who had just been hired by Capcom after graduating college. "Capcom back then was famous for arcade games, not for Nintendo games, because Nintendo had just come out. And the company said, 'OK, we want to make a new Nintendo game. Make a new consumer game. And so, this game, we're going to call it Rockman. For this game, we're going to need the best artist we have.' Which apparently was me at the time. These teams are all very, very small, especially that one, because that was new territory. Capcom's focus has always been arcade, it had always been that, so they didn't want to use too much of their resources, but they knew that they were going to have one man do all the character designs, so they needed the best. I got pulled onto that team. I came into work one day and my seat was not at the Street Fighter team. It was, in fact, at the Rockman team."

The creation of Rockman—which would go on to be renamed Mega Man for the U.S. market since it was easier for American gamers to relate to—was fueled by a number of inspirations, all of them instrumental in creating the characters, visuals and gameplay that millions of players have come to know and love.

"We were all about the same age, and were all from this generation that really grew up on anime," reveals Inafune, speaking about the game's creative staff. "So the Rockman character is really based upon Japanese animation. And when we were making him, at the time, Nintendo games really did not have a huge focus on characters. It was more the game, not...you know, they really didn't have great characters. And a lot of the time, so long as it looked like a person, that was good enough. And then, when you think about it, even Mario back then,

he fired fireballs...out of his stomach? Or...you didn't know where it was coming from, but it doesn't make sense. Why is it coming out of his stomach? So, it's like, when we made our Mega Man character, you know, if this person's really going to fire, where is the fire going to come from? It's going to come out of his hand or something. His hand transforms into a gun and you can actually see it come out of his arm. We wanted to make sure that the animation and the motion was realistic and actually made sense. So with Mega Man, we had this perfect blending of game character with animation ideas. So you have the game world and the anime world all blended into one."

When it came to actually creating the Mega Man world, Inafune was responsible for not only the design of all of the game's characters and enemies, but also rendering them in pixel form for the Famicom, as well as creating the game logo, Japanese package design and even the game manual. His instrumental role has led many to refer to him as the "father of Mega Man." As Inafune explains, "There I was all alone, and I had to draw all of these character designs. ...We didn't have [a lot of] people, so after drawing character designs, I was actually doing the dotting for the Nintendo! Back then, people weren't specialized and we had to do a lot of different things because there was so few people, so I really ended up doing all the characters."

Inafune's designs were affected, of course, by the technical limitations of the 8-bit Famicom. In fact, one of Mega Man's most distinguishing characteristics only came about as a result of the hardware he was designed for. "With the design, we were basically after something simple and something cute. We were working with the Famicom, so we were very limited with what we could actually create," remarks Inafune. "And actually, the coloring of the character, back then, we didn't choose to make it blue. Because we were using the Nintendo, we had to make it blue. What that means is that you had, I think, 56 colors that you can choose from, and of that palette, the most were blue. ...So if you want to use the most detailed color, it would have been blue, so therefore we



“...with Mega Man, we had this perfect blending of game character with animation ideas.”

—Keiji Inafune Creator of Mega Man



decided to make the main character blue. The Blue Bomber is really blue because of the Nintendo, not anything else.”

The second component that went into Rockman's creation was its thematic use of musical elements. Not just in an aural sense—although the early Mega Man games did have some of the best 8-bit soundtracks ever—but in a broader sense that the creators hoped would appeal to gamers from a marketing standpoint. Though it isn't obvious to uninitiated American gamers, the name “Rockman” is, in fact, derived from rock ‘n’ roll, not from pieces of stone. “This game's always been based around music,” states Inafune. “You know Rock, and the character Roll...you know Blues. And the reason why we did that is because music is something that's always, always around us. Music is something everybody knows. There are very few people out there in the world that don't listen to music in some way, shape or form. We all feel it; it has power. So to base characters on that, that's something that we all can understand, and we can all...buy that concept.” This musical influence continued throughout the series with characters like Rush, Tango, Forte and Beat.

Without good gameplay, great animation and thematic underpinnings don't add up to much, but fortunately, Rockman boasted excellent platforming action and unique weapon-swiping gameplay in addition to everything else. As most longtime Mega Man fans already know, the basis for this gameplay device of acquiring weapons and using them to defeat other enemies is based on the game janken—also known as rock-paper-scissors. “This game has always been based on rock-paper-scissors, which is one of the ultimate games, because it's so easy to play and there's always a winner or a loser. You can tie, of course, but there's no one element that is stronger than the others. If you have rock, it wins with scissors but it loses to paper. Paper loses to scissors but beats rock. So, there's always a strong and there's always a weak, and when we planned the system, that's what we wanted to do...no single weapon was stronger than any other.”

The elements all came together in December 1987, when Rockman was released upon the Japanese gaming public, allowing them to thrill to the exploits of the blue hero as he battled the likes of Cutman, Elecman, Iceman, Fireman, Bombman, Gutsman and ultimately the evil Dr. Wily. It also let players meet

Rockman's sister, Roll, and his creator, Dr. Light, for the first time. Few who played Rockman can forget the dangers of jumping across disappearing platforms, the tension of running under hopping one-eyed mechanical monstrosities, the excitement of discovering a hidden weapon, the frustration of exploding on instant-death spikes. A U.S. release quickly followed, where the game proved to be a sleeper hit. Gamers enamored with titles like Metroid and Zelda initially were repulsed by the game's box art, featuring a blue-and-yellow middle-aged

Mega Man (original series)

This is where it all started—with the original Mega Man (NES, 1988) taking on mad scientist Dr. Wily and his crazy robotic creations. The adventure continued in the extremely polished Mega Man 2 (NES, 1989) and then further evolved in Mega Man 3 (NES, 1990), Mega Man 4 (NES, 1992), Mega Man 5 (NES, 1992) and Mega Man 6 (1994, NES). Mega Man 7 (SNES, 1995) introduced the villainous Bass, and Mega Man 8 (PS/SS, 1997) ranks among the series' best. The series has also appeared on numerous other systems, including Game Boy, Game Gear and PC, and even spun off into Mega Man's Soccer (SNES, 1994). The last installment in the original saga, Mega Man & Bass (GBA, 2003), just made it to the U.S. last year, but it originally hit the Super Famicom back in 1998 as Rockman & Forte.



Mega Man 8 ranks among the best of the original Mega Man games.





Mega Man 6, 1994

Comic Books

Mega Man's foray into the world of comic books got off to a "Rocky" start (ho ho) when the series came to a close after issue #4. A second series, based on Mega Man X, was subsequently announced by Dreamwave, but it has been "postponed until further notice" according to a company representative. Fortunately, fans can look forward to the Mega Man NT Warrior manga from Viz, coming this May.



Dreamwave's comic showcased Mega Man's battles as well as his school life, where he was known as "Rocky Light."

Mega Man on the cover ("Bullshit!" yells Inafune upon seeing the art recently. "Can you imagine what it must have felt like to have one of the marketing staff tell you that it had to be this image or Americans wouldn't get it?! Let's just say I started to think Americans would accept just about anything if they liked this kind of art!"), but once they played it, word began to quietly spread (back before gaming magazines or the Internet were big) that Capcom had a hit on their hands.

Rockman's release proved solid, and helped cement the Famicom as a mainstay of gaming for Capcom, but fell short of being a runaway hit. "While it did sell more than we had expected, [Rockman 1] wasn't a huge success as far as the numbers go," Inafune admits. The Rockman team was assigned to create a new game for the Famicom (which was never released in the U.S.) called Professional Baseball Murder Mystery. However, the team felt very strongly about Rockman and begged management to allow them to continue the series, hoping to build on the knowledge they gained from creating the original and make Mega Man even better the second time around.

"We liked the character," Inafune says, "and our group, even though the company, the business side, said, 'Make this other game,' we said, 'We really want



Mega Man to stay around.' And so we spent our own time and kind of did both games at the same time and said, you know, 'Please just let us make this other game.' And the company's like, 'So long as you finish that other one we wanted you to, fine, you can make this other, you can continue the Mega Man series.' So we, of our own accord, got together, spent our own time, we worked really, really hard, you know, just 20-hour days to complete this, because we were making something we wanted to make. Probably in all of my years of actually being in a video game company, that was the best time of my working at Capcom, because we were actually working toward a goal, we were laying it all on the line, we were doing what we wanted to do. And it really showed in the game, because it's a game, once again, that we put all of our time and effort and love, so to speak, into it, designing it. That's why that's my favorite [Mega Man] game, and that really established Mega Man as a series."

The Rockman team's gamble paid off; Rockman 2, released in December 1988, was a big hit that featured better graphics, better music, more enemies and more innovative weapons. Robot Masters like Quickman, Metalman, Heatman and Woodman, as well as huge (for the Famicom) bosses like Dr. Wily's dragon and the Gutsdozer, challenged players this time out, and Rockman gained new transportation items that let him reach otherwise inaccessible areas. The U.S. version, Mega Man 2, followed in mid-1989.

With this release, Mega Man was established as both a bona fide hit and a franchise for Capcom. The Blue Bomber spread into LCD games and onto PC, and he even appeared as a pudgy green freak in the Captain N: The Game Master cartoon, but his true home remained Nintendo's systems. Sequels began coming out on a regular basis, each one adding something new to the mix but retaining the gameplay of the original. The third installment, released in 1990, introduced Rockman's robotic canine pal, Rush, and also added a slide move to Rockman's repertoire. Next

came Rockman World for Game Boy (known as Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge in America), which was essentially a portable remix of the first two Rockman Famicom games, followed by Rockman 4, Rockman World 2, Rockman 5, Rockman World 3, Rockman 6 and Rockman World 4. Exclusively in Japan, a boardgame-style title featuring the Rockman cast, called Wily & Light's RockBoard, was released for the Famicom in early 1993.

However, by this time, the days of 8-bit were on the wane. Although fans continued to be delighted by the Famicom/NES games, the Super Nintendo (Super Famicom) and Genesis (Mega Drive) were the dominant systems, and gamers the world over wanted to see what Mega Man would be able to do on new, more powerful hardware. Their questions were answered with the release of Rockman X in December 1993. Set approximately 100 years after the original Rockman series, Rockman X existed in a darker, more technologically advanced world where human-like robots called Reploids lived side-by-side with humans. When Reploids would go bad, they were dubbed Mavericks, and so it was up to Maverick Hunters—such as the series' main character, the titular Rockman X—to track them and stop them. Though much of the series' backstory is open to argument—is Rockman X the same character as the original Rockman?—there was no question that the game looked

"...we put all of our time and effort and love, so to speak, into it, designing it."

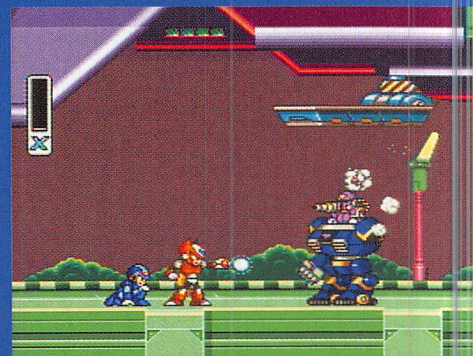
—Keiji Inafune Creator of Mega Man



Mega Man 5, 1992

Mega Man X

Set 100 years after the original Mega Man series, Mega Man X (SNES, 1994) told the story of Mega Man X, a human-like robot discovered by Dr. Cain, and his ally Zero. "I wanted to make a new Mega Man," remarks Inafune. "That new Mega Man was to be called Zero. Thanks to this series, one of my favorite characters was born, and his popularity has lasted right along with Mega Man's." After sacrificing himself in the original game, Zero returned to life in Mega Man X2 (SNES, 1995), then became a playable character in Mega Man X3 (SNES, 1996). The series made the jump to 32-bit in Mega Man X4 (PS/SS, 1997) then continued in Mega Man X5 (PS, 2000), where Mega Man finally learned to duck, the lackluster Mega Man X6 (PS, 2001) and, most recently, the 3D Mega Man X7 (PS2, 2003).



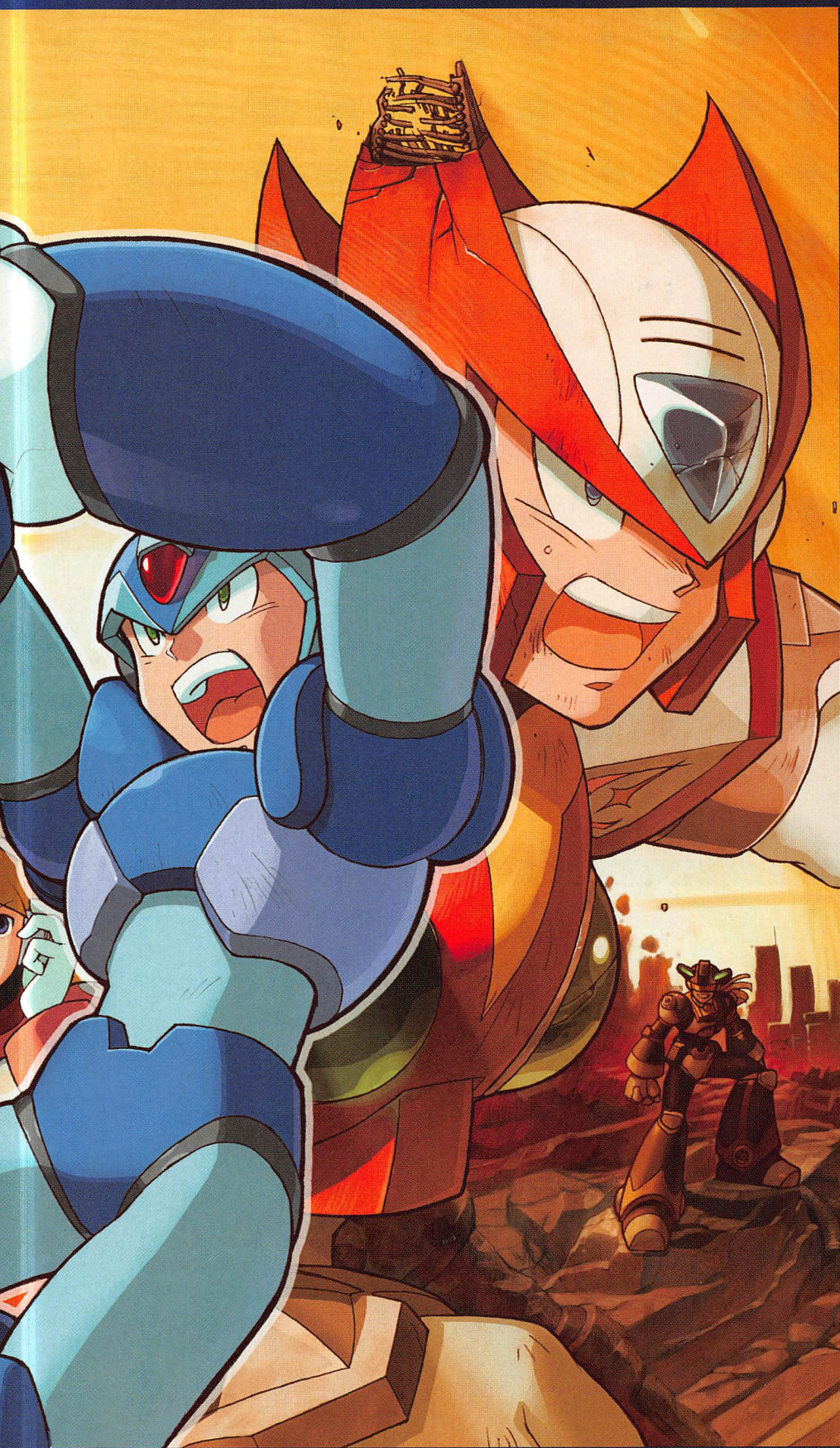
Mega Man may have the title role, but Zero is the cool one.

Action Figures

Mega Man began invading toy store shelves again in 2003 with Jazwares' 6" and 10" figures based on both the original Mega Man and Mega Man X. The second series just hit stores—offering characters like Quickman and Axl—and new assortments are slated for later this year. Meanwhile, toy giant Mattel recently announced their intent to release anime-based Mega Man NT Warrior toys in August; the line will include 10" figures of Mega Man and Proto Man, six 2" diorama figure sets and role-playing gear. Though many Rockman toys have been released in Japan, the most notable are Bandai's incredibly slick snap-together models/action figures based on the classic and X series; too bad all Bandai released in the U.S. were wretched figures based on the American cartoon. The other Mega Man figure released in the U.S. came from Toy Biz as part of their Marvel vs. Capcom series.



X and Axl are part of Jazwares' Mega Man line, available now.



Mega Man X5, 2000

Mega Man Legends

Not only does Mega Man Legends (PS, 1998) take Mega Man into 3D and dramatically shift the gameplay toward an adventure focus, it takes place in a completely different continuity than all previous games in the franchise. Mega Man Legends 2 (PS, 2000) featured the same type of gameplay, but with more characters and in more varied environments, while antagonists Tron Bonne and her Sevbots got to star in their own spin-off game, *The Misadventures of Tron Bonne* (PS, 2000). "What can I say?" says Inafune. "I love it. And you can bet when I get the chance, and more importantly the free time, you WILL be seeing a sequel of this."



In *Legends*, Mega Man could just never get that monkey off his back.

Music

Given the musical thematic basis of Rockman, it's only appropriate that a number of Rockman soundtrack CDs have been released, primarily in Japan. These CDs include the original soundtracks of Rockman X7, Rockman Dash, the Rockman.EXE series and the rockin' Rockman arcade games, as well as a jazzy remix of Rockman X, a drama CD and a Rockman vocal collection featuring the lyrical theme songs exclusive to the Japanese releases. The niftiest piece of Rockman audio would have to be a commemorative OST three-disc set released in 2002, containing the music from the six primary Famicom Rockman games; the one to avoid is the 1995 U.S. Mega Man soundtrack...which is drawn from the cartoon, not the games. Fans may also want to check out the Minibosses' latest CD, featuring their interpretation of tunes from Mega Man 2.



Relax to the 8-bit tunes of this limited-edition three-disc set.



fantastic, or that added gameplay features, like being able to climb walls or find capsules that contained new abilities, infused new life into the franchise.

"It's incredible to take a look at how the games and characters have evolved over the years..." proclaims marketing director Thorson. "The characters continue to evolve and improve with time, both graphically and with their abilities and powers. Even more importantly, the solid gameplay has also continued to evolve and improve with each new generation."

Changes to the Mega Man formula have become a trend when new hardware is involved, always pushing the system to get more out of the game. "Basically, it's been because of the hardware that [Mega Man] has evolved," declares Inafune. "Mega Man was a character that was kind of developed—even his color was determined—based on what the hardware could actually do. So Mega Man's always been a character that had to evolve based upon the hardware... I think a lot of games are that way; you're going to see changes in the characters based on new hardware that appears. ...That's the obvious process that a character has to follow: evolving."

Another major new element introduced to the X series was the inclusion of the Maverick Hunter, Zero. The bright-red, ponytail-sporting hero, in fact, could have wound up as the star of the game. "When the X series came out, I really wanted to redesign Mega Man," Inafune confesses. "I wanted a totally different Mega Man. I'm a designer, a creator; I wanted something new. I didn't want to use the same old Mega Man. And so I made this new character, and of course I knew the new character I created, Zero, wasn't anything like the old Mega Man and people were going to say, 'That's not Mega Man!' So I redesigned Mega Man as well, and we had this other new high-techno sort of Mega Man, and then we had Zero. I really liked this character, so I used him as a sub-character in the game and, you know, ever since then he's gotten more

and more popular."

Over the next few years, both the original Mega Man and the X series continued strong across various consoles and beyond—he was even able to further infiltrate the pop culture of North America with a (rather terrible) Saturday morning animated TV show and action figures based upon the same show—but Mega Man hadn't stopped evolving. As new hardware became available, Mega Man took new forms and established new continuities, such as the 3D adventure series Mega Man Legends (Rockman Dash) on PlayStation and the RPG-like Mega Man Battle Network (Rockman.EXE) on Game Boy Advance, with the goal always being to appeal to the tastes of modern gamers.

"You have to think out of the box," states Inafune. "You have to think of what your average user's going to be, what your average customer is going to be, and if it's kids, you have to think of what kids like in games. What they can appreciate, what new things that are popular in that time period. With the Battle Network series, we took and put it in the RPG-esque sort of world... You have to be open minded, you have to be able to think as if you were in the customer's shoes."

Inafune continues: "If I don't appeal to kids in that [current] time period, then he'll be a forgotten character. It's like a classic car, maybe from the '50s or '60s. It may look pretty, and people may say 'Oh, that's cool,' but when they get in and it doesn't have power steering, it doesn't have the auto-locks and there's no AC, you can say that it's pretty and it's cool all you want to, but people that are used to that kind of comfort, used to modern-day, they're not going to really appreciate it. So, the same thing with Mega Man. You have to evolve it and give it all these new features so that people of that day can really appreciate."

One thing that Inafune has no intention of changing is Mega Man's well-recognized, oft-complained-about high level of difficulty. "What I feel truly makes Mega Man Mega Man is getting shot and killed, or falling down a

Mega Man Battle Network

"I created this game so that I could experience the fun of Rockman with my own son," explains Inafune. "We both really love this series." In this version of Mega Man continuity, Mega Man exists as a Net Navi program in the PET (PErsonal Terminal) of Lan, his human partner. The RPG-like Mega Man Battle Network (GBA, 2001) has already spawned sequels in the form of Mega Man Battle Network 2 (GBA, 2002) and Mega Man Battle Network 3 (GBA, 2003) in both Blue and White versions, with a fourth chapter coming stateside this summer. Spin-offs include Mega Man Network Transmission (GC, 2003) and Mega Man Battle Chip Challenge (GBA, 2004).



The upcoming Mega Man Battle Network 4 will be available in two versions: Red Sun and Blue Moon.

Cartoons

The Mega Man NT Warrior cartoon on Kids' WB, which retells the adventures of Mega Man and Lan (and friends) from the Mega Man Battle Network games, is all set to begin its second season this spring. The popular cartoon will pick up right where it left off—in the middle of the all-important N1 Grand Prix Net Battling Tournament. For the masochistic, check out the quality-challenged '90s Mega Man cartoon available on DVD from ADV.



Mega Man NT Warrior brings the franchise to life on Kids' WB.



Mega Man Legends, 1998

Trading Cards

A one-two punch of Mega Man trading card goodness is set to hit in the coming months. In June, Decipher will deliver the competitive and collectable Mega Man NT Warrior Trading Card Game, featuring approximately 130 cards plus a foil subset. And, for the old-school fan, an impressive-looking set of trading cards, featuring original Capcom art from the original Mega Man series, is coming from Artbox Entertainment. This set, which contains 45 standard cards plus nine foil chase cards, should hit this spring.



Artbox's Mega Man cards will be must-haves for the die-hard fan.

BY THE NUMBERS...

As of press time, the following number of Mega Man games have been released on each system in the U.S.: NES (6), Game Boy (5), Super NES (5), Game Boy Color (2), Game Gear (1), PS (7), Saturn (2), N64 (1), GBA (8), PS2 (1), GameCube (1).

Mega Man Zero

The Mega Man Zero series is Keiji Inafune's true vision of what occurred several hundred years after Mega Man X5. "It was my dream come true," he says. "I got to use Zero, the character I created of my own accord, as the main hero in the game." In this series, Zero is revived to help fight for Reploid freedom...and wait until you see what happened to X. Both games in this series, Mega Man Zero (GBA, 2002) and Mega Man Zero 2 (GBA, 2003) are known for their severe difficulty and serve their legacy proud. The upcoming Mega Man Zero 3 should be no different.



Classic 2D Mega Man challenge lives on in Mega Man Zero.



Mega Man Battle Network 2, 2002



hole, and losing, but yet feeling like—'Aah! Frustrated! I lost! But I want to play again. I want to continue to keep playing until I beat this stage or continue to keep playing until I clear the game.' So people who are complaining now, saying it's too hard...they're not true gamers. They don't truly understand what the game is about, which is the frustration, which is about clearing a difficult goal. That's what Mega Man's always been about."

Alongside the franchise's ability evolve, Inafune also attributes Mega Man's longevity to a number of factors, including collaborating with younger designers who may be more in tune with what fledgling gamers expect, as well as his own continued love for the character and the series.

"Basically, when I first started creating the character, I really loved Rockman. It's a great character and it made me happy creating it," remarks Inafune. "So probably the reason that Mega Man has been around for this long, and continues to be successful, is because I still love that character. Because I want to still keep doing things with him. If you really like something, and you think you've got something good on your hands, you're not going to want to let it go."

Of course, Inafune admits, there have been frustrating times when dealing with Mega Man, like when he was forced to abandon the Rockman name for the American market. "I came over to America and said, 'You know, I've got this character, Rockman. Let's put it out!' and the staff here said, 'No, we can't go with [the name] Rockman. The name Rock is kind of dangerous and it's not going to actually fit the character.' And another area I got in a tiff with the staff about was about Blues, because they were telling me, 'Blues...that's not a name, that doesn't make any sense.' And they said it has to have 'man' after it like Mega Man and everybody else, and I said, 'But you know, Blues is based on music and it's an actual thing and that's what I want to call it.' And they said that it would be better if it was Protoman. But unfortunately, that meant the ultimate concept of what I was really going after with Mega Man, with Rockman, which was based on a music concept, kind of slipped off course...."

Another difficulty arose when it came to continuing the X series after the fifth installment, which Inafune had planned to be the end of the saga. "I was originally planning on ending the series at around X4 or 5," Inafune reveals. "I really expected that to be the ending. And so I was all happy... 'OK, done with X5. That series is now closed off, now let's start Zero. I'm really excited to start Zero series.' Here's Zero, you know, he's kind of dead, and you power him up and he comes back to life, right? In my mind, in X5, Zero died. And so I'd always planned to make Zero come back to life in the Zero series, but then X6 comes out sooner from another division and Zero comes back to life in that, and I'm like, 'What's this!? Now my story for Zero doesn't make sense! Zero's

been brought back to life two times!'"

Fortunately, Inafune says, the occasional difficulties with Rockman are far outnumbered by its positive aspects, and when trouble does arise, it only serves to help him make better games in the future. "Basically, Mega Man is my teacher and my parent, because he has taught me what it's like to make a game. Thanks to Mega Man, I've been able to create a lot of different games, and he's taught me what my mistakes were. He's taught me what things work and what things don't work. He's been with me longer than any other character and he's always shown me the way. He's always told me how I can make games better, and sometimes he's helped me understand how I made games worse. So he is the ultimate teacher when it comes to developing games."

Presently, the Blue Bomber is enjoying success in three separate series—Mega Man Battle Network on GBA, Mega Man Zero, also on GBA, and Mega Man X, which recently made the jump to 3D on PlayStation 2. He's also starring in the hit animated series Mega Man NT Warrior on Kids' WB and has been stirring up interest in the comic shop thanks to the Mega Man comic books published by Dreamwave Productions. So what's next for Mega Man? Plenty. Mega Man X: Command Mission is an RPG set in the X timeframe, boasting unique hybrid battles utilizing both real-time and turn-based elements, which will come to PlayStation 2 and GameCube in summer 2004. On the Game Boy Advance side of things, Mega Man Zero 3 and the fourth chapter of Mega Man Battle Network will find their way stateside this year.

But what about something new to entice the older gamer who still longs for another adventure with the original Mega Man? "You first think of Mega Man as a kid's game, right?" rhetorically queries Thorson. "Sure, Mega Man appeals to millions of kids around the

Mega Man Cameos

Aside from Mega Man's usual routine of beating up Dr. Wily (or Sigma...or the Bonnes...), the Blue Bomber has had a few guest appearances in other Capcom titles. He and secret character Roll teamed up with the likes of Ryu and Morrigan in *Marvel vs. Capcom: Clash of Superheroes* (1998), then returned in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2: New Age of Heroes* (2000), along with Tron Bonne and a Servbot. Mega Man was also one of the stars of the top-down action title *Cannon Spike* (2000), and in *Pocket Fighter* (1998), cat-girl Felicia transformed into classic Mega Man during one of her attacks while his Legends incarnation looked on from one of the backgrounds. Most recently, Mega Man.EXE jacked in to the world of *Onimusha: Blade Warriors* (2004) as a hidden fighter, complete with his own Net Battling background, while Zero (in his Mega Man Zero guise) got to appear in both *Blade Warriors* and *SNK vs. Capcom: Chaos* (2003).



Mega Man universes collide in the world of Onimusha!

"...people who are complaining now, saying it's too hard... they're not true gamers."

—Keiji Inafune Creator of Mega Man



Mega Man Zero, 2002

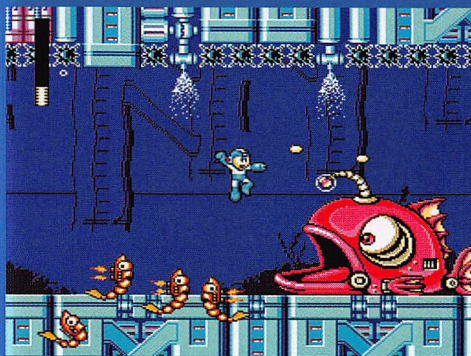
world. But now there are also millions of people who have literally grown up with the Blue Bomber. People in their 20s and 30s who played the games when they were younger are still enjoying them. The nostalgia factor is huge." So does that mean that Mega Man 9 could be in the works? After all, Dr. Wily was still on the loose after Mega Man & Bass.

"That is going to depend largely on the amount of input of...fans that actually say, 'Yes, we really, really want a [Mega Man] 9, we really want a 9!'" says Inafune. "And my studio, personally, if we ever have more money in the coffers and we have a little more time, and enough staff, that's probably not a bad idea. That may be something that I really want to try and make. But I feel that if I were to make that game, I wouldn't be making it for kids, which is what most Mega Man games are based for. If you're going to go back and do a [Mega Man] 9, that's obviously a throwback to the super old-school, which people that are like 28, 30, that have been playing Mega Man for their whole lives...it would be for them, for the fans, not for the actual young gamers, which is what Mega Man's originally intended for."

Even if Mega Man 9 doesn't come to pass, hardcore fans still have those tempting compilations to look forward to: the console and GBA versions of Mega Man Anniversary Collection. "[The game formerly known as] Mega Man Mania and Mega Man Anniversary Collection are designed to be a celebration

In Japan Only

Although Mega Man has headlined nearly 40 games in the U.S., several of his titles have remained exclusive to Japan. Included in that number are Wily & Light's RockBoard (Famicom, 1993), Rockman Mega World (Mega Drive, 1993), enhanced ports of Rockman X3 (PS/SS, 1996), Rockman Battle & Chase (PS, 1997), Super Adventure Rockman (PS/SS, 1998), Rockman & Forte (Super Famicom, 1998), a terrible handheld port of Rockman & Forte (WonderSwan, 1999), six ports of the original Famicom Rockman games called Rockman Complete Works (PS, 1999), Rockman Battle & Fighters (Neo Geo Pocket, 2000), Rockman.EXE WS (WonderSwan, 2002) and Rockman.EXE N1 Battle (WonderSwan, 2003). A special box set, containing all six Complete Works games and Rockman X7, as well as seven commemorative pins, was also recently released in Japan. Any chance any of these games will yet make it stateside? "Stay tuned! We're always working on new ways to introduce all the Mega Man games," says Todd Thorson, Capcom's marketing director.



Rockman Mega World: 16-bit bliss that never saw a proper U.S. release.



Mega Man & Bass, 2003

of the Blue Bomber," comments the games' producer, Robert Johnson. "The 'old-school' Mega Man games are some of the best platform games ever designed. ...For us older gamers out there, it's a blast to go back and play these classic games and to see if we still have the skills to beat them."

In addition, Capcom almost certainly have something else up their sleeves. Mega Man has already made his mark in action, adventure, RPGs and even occasionally in driving and sports, but it's clear that his creator thinks Mega Man has a lot more games left in him and many more stories to tell.

"I think personally that Mega Man still has a lot that he can do, and he can still get bigger and bigger," enthuses Inafune, "and I think that probably his big successes are still yet to come. I feel it hasn't reached its full potential yet."

END



Ninja Gaiden

Your Xbox just went up in value

You've seen the screens in all of their glory, read the cover stories and heard inklings from the master himself...yet you have no idea. We did a cover story and I had no idea. What a master of deception Itagaki is, reserving so much of his masterpiece for all to see and feel, including us, until after it was completed. I'm sure he's watching right now though his dark sunglasses, smoking a cigarette no doubt, as his reviews rain down. What Team Ninja have achieved is no less than a modern miracle, a game that somehow conjures the same stickiness and addictive spirit as its 8-bit juggernaut. *Ninja Gaiden* for the Xbox is, quite simply, a perfect video game.

If only it were that simple. For some, *Ninja Gaiden* may be the exact opposite, as it is rock hard—a merciless game that makes you earn every luscious inch. Let your guard down at any time and you're dead; fail to manage your limited resources like you paid with real money and you're dead; fail to become lord of hand-eye coordination and grace under pressure and you're dead. You'll die a lot unraveling

Itagaki's master plan, but feel so satisfied after mastering each challenge you'll be hard pressed to think about or do anything else until the credits roll. The game pushes you and pushes you and then pushes you some more, forcing you to become the gamer you once were, or toil away until you reach its lofty expectations.

Of course, none of this would be acceptable if it not for the fact that the game defines perfection: perfect camera, perfect graphics (god bless the power of the Xbox), perfect frame rate, absurd polish and almost otherworldly balance. Mastering Ryu's melee and projectile weapons, nimble maneuvers and magical abilities (called *Ninpo*) is your only sanctuary, and doing so is infinitely satisfying as you penetrate the labyrinthine cities, monasteries and caverns of the Vigoor Empire, laced with enemies as formidable as most bosses, and bosses that simply explode your mind.

Ducking into *Muramasa* shops to carefully expend the game's currency—the vanquished souls of the dearly departed—you'll discover that item management also plays a significant role; you'll strive

"Ninja Gaiden for the Xbox is, quite simply, a perfect video game."

to conserve as many potions as possible for each breathtaking climax. There were a few moments when I was in complete denial: "How does he expect me to do that? There's no way I'll ever do that!" only to find out that "that" was only half the challenge. But there is always a way... some hidden opening for you to find, and once you do, it's like an epiphany with a payoff so grand you'll be salivating at the thought of more, no matter how painful. The game that introduced cinemas has once again shattered the bar. As majestic as the screens are, they don't begin to do the game justice.

Based on the levels we sampled for our November 2003 cover story, I feared the retooling might result in a case of chronic hack 'n' slash—masterful albeit one-dimensional gameplay with an emphasis on adrenaline-charged battles to appease the masses—never imagining the kind of deep, layered adventure it turned out to be. Speaking with Itagaki in person, he never let on that the game was so deep, filled with ample parts platforming, exploration, Metroid-like backtracking and interactive elements, on top of the best in-game fighting (and models) ever produced. While other games may boast the same components, the skill with which every last detail is laid along with the creature designs, cast and impeccable cinemas is

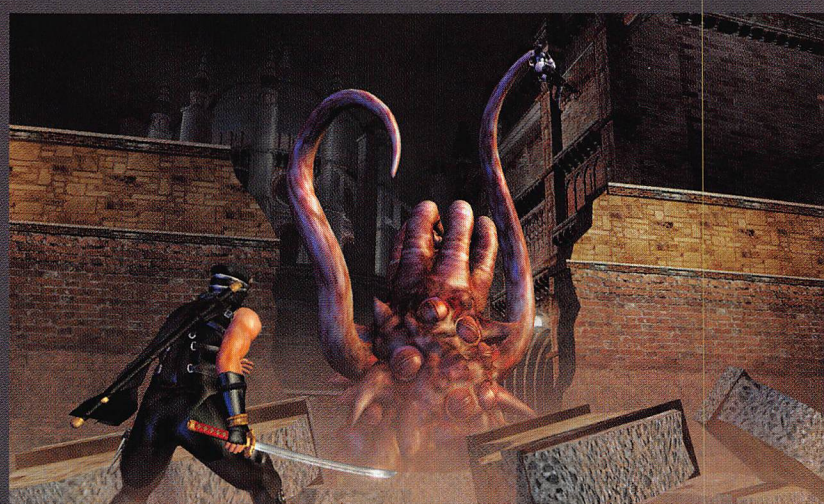
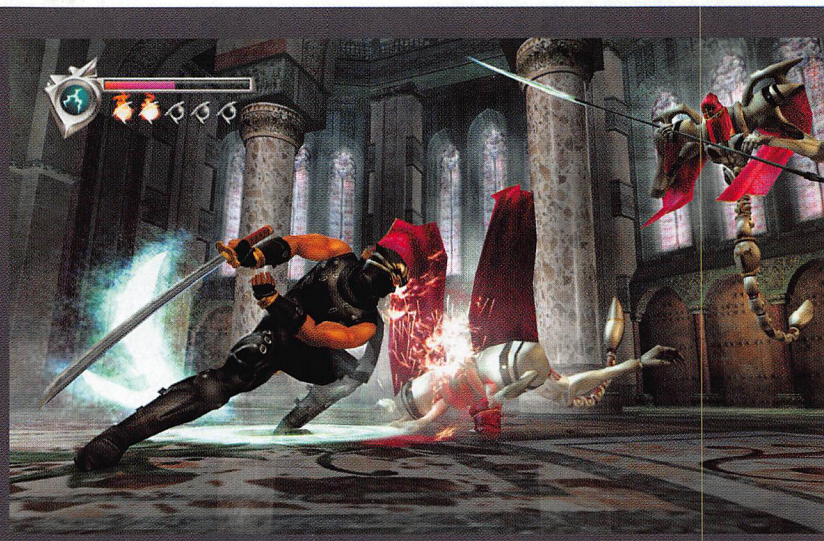
what sets Ninja Gaiden apart. This is the whole package, the holy grail of action adventure gaming, so enjoy it while you can because you probably won't see another game like it for a very long time, if ever. Tecmo's dynamic is founded on quality over quantity, and Team Ninja is the heart of the organization—one of the few developers in the world afforded complete autonomy. Mention market research to Itagaki and he'd probably chop your gonads off. Tecmo's given us two modern action games (Rygar and now this) and they both beat most games over the head with the bar.

Tecmo's betting the farm that Ninja Gaiden is so superior that today's casual gamers will rise to the occasion rather than the return line, and that goes a long way in my book in an era where branding and/or the green light from Wal-Mart and Target dictate content over any other single factor. Whether or not a throwback to the purity that existed a decade ago can thrive in today's market remains to be seen, but in the meantime, for me, whatever happens from here doesn't matter nearly as much now that I've had my Ninja Gaiden.

Dave Halverson A+

System: Xbox
Developer: Team Ninja
Publisher: Tecmo
Available: March

If you look closely, you can see something in its left tentacle. Her name is Rachel. You'll be wanting to save her.



The Suffering

The squeamish need not apply

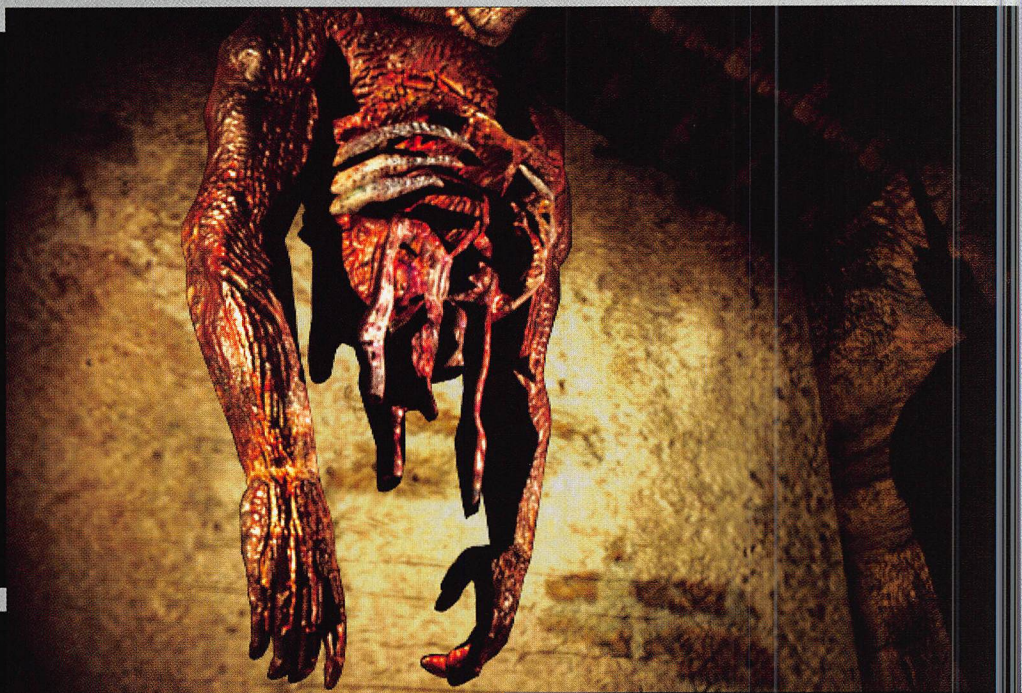
There were moments in *The Suffering* when I questioned the value of what I was playing—what I was, quite honestly, really enjoying. The game can be revolting and senseless. It can be thrilling, poorly executed, compelling, expertly crafted and everything in between.

There is a scene towards the latter stretch where the ghost of an inmate once on death row begs for penance as he's tied down in an electric chair, squirming as bolts of energy arc across the room. It's not the visual depiction that cuts; as you attempt to free him and avoid his attacks, he reminisces—a morbid pleasure in his voice—of his wife's awful murder by his own hands during a conjugal visit. The sudden, horribly vivid nature of the description caught me off guard. I wanted to immediately condemn the game for going too far, for not providing the proper context off which the violence could emerge with an inspired intent other than to disgust.

And then I continue on, actually wanting to resolve the story, wanting to understand why all this evil carnage is happening. I like this game a lot; in some regards, I like what it wants to do as much as what it succeeds at doing. When the final credits rolled, I felt I had played a game that, in just enough ways, took me to a new territory. There is more to the *Suffering* than its nasty surface.

Strip away the violence and the excellent creature designs and you still have a fine example of a frantic action game. The speed of play is as high as anything out there, with a control scheme that takes some getting used to but emerges as perfect within the flow of the gameplay. There will be complaints about the lack of auto-targeting; auto-targeting would kill the experience. I love moving and strafing, constantly finessing the crosshairs from a shotgun or dual pistols right between the eyes of my attacker. This game is enormously visceral, a bold example of straight third-person-action fun.

The *Suffering* would probably be more reprehensible if not for the colorful, gaudy look that lends enough cartoon innocence to the violence. When a guard blasts the head off a monster from his tower, gets skewered from behind by the machete-for-hands attack of its friend, screaming to his final death as he's entangled in barbed wire below, my response came with a delighted smile. Dismembered bodies litter the corners and hang off trees and fences, but not once did I really cringe. It treads in camp along with genuine horror, more excess than restrained psychological terror. Clearly, this is fantasy, and in the end, you'll be saying it's cool more than truly frightening.





Add a big check in the plus column for the Suffering's locations, which move from the bowels of the island penitentiary to the outer grounds to caves and an asylum—a disappointingly underdeveloped area. As a death-row inmate yourself, your mission is to escape at any cost, calling on the help of anyone who may cry out for it. Several characters are met along the way, adding a strong element of support and welcome company. Their dialogue showcases the use of profanity to a numbing, forced degree—yes, we all love the F word, point made—adding to the campy disarmament of the experience.

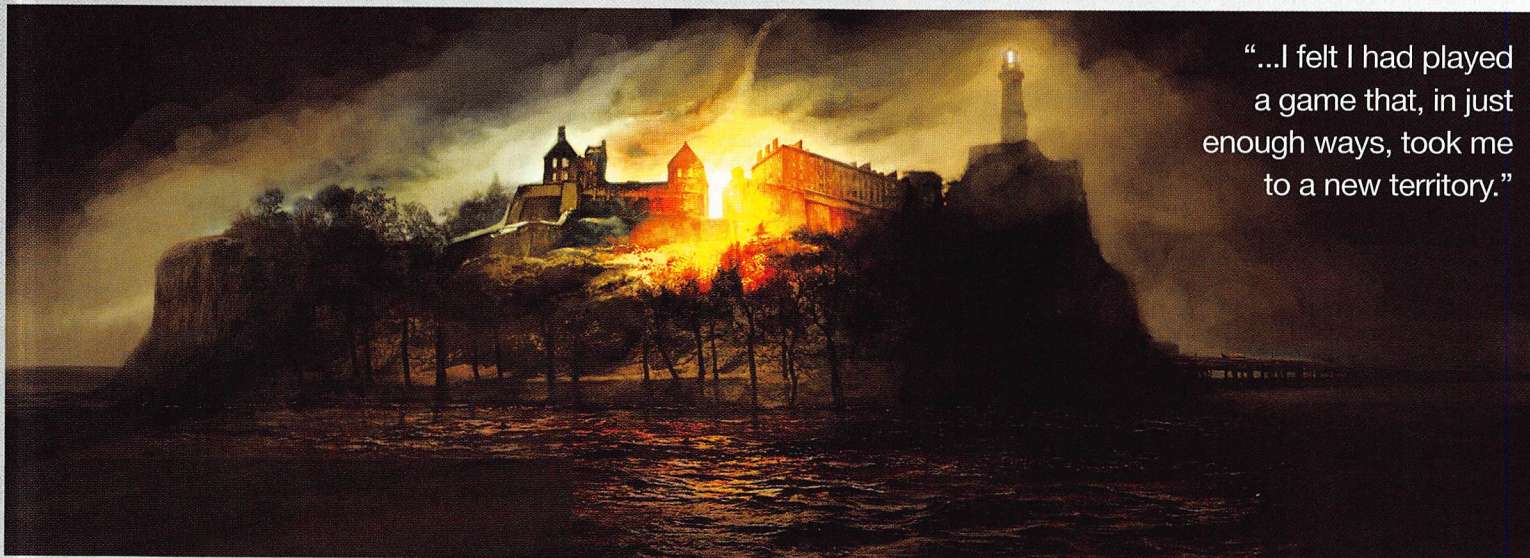
It would be a disservice to avoid mentioning the animations and awesome presence of the creatures. There's no tiring of taking an axe to the stitched, bloated stomachs of the Fester, which lumber around swinging a giant ball and chain and release rats when they explode. Or unloading a mounted minigun—the most fun I've had with this staple play mechanic in a long time—into the giant Marksman, reincarnations of military firing squads that emerge from the dirt with rifles strapped to their backs. Or just watching a Slayer skate around on the slender knives it has for legs, fighting off the Mainliner as they toss syringes like darts, removed from a cloister on their body.

Like the morbid embrace of the Nooseman descending from the ceilings, you're in a vice grip with The Suffering. **Brady Fletcher B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Surreal
Publisher: Midway
Available: March



If you prefer your carnage from the first-person, you can switch views with the tap of a button.



"...I felt I had played a game that, in just enough ways, took me to a new territory."



Samurai Jack

The Samurai Jack bandwagon has stopped at Sega. All aboard!

Life is full of surprises, but few so sweet as the recent news that Sega is not only bringing *Astro Boy* to life—via Sonic Team and Treasure no less—but also publishing the quintessential video game version of *Samurai Jack*, a cartoon that absolutely, positively demands no less than red carpet treatment, which, I'm happy to say, it's getting.

Samurai Jack is a big, beautiful hub-based action-platformer, carved from the same mold as the likes of *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Super Mario 64*, only sans the overly complex central hub (and bird) and with a deeper bag of tricks. Jack is seeking a time portal to reach Aku, the demon he is sworn to vanquish, inching ever closer to his goal by following in his dark wake, gathering wisdom as he frees imprisoned creatures from the tyranny of Aku's minions. He's a bad seed, that Aku.

The beauty of this game lies in the evolving play mechanics, level design and especially the details. Beginning with the play mechanics, Jack learns to shoot arrows, fling shuriken, double jump, jump-stab, roll attack, deflect, block, perform combos and deliver special Zen attacks on his way to the world hub, and each skill works with 2D-like precision. If a great double jump is the precursor to a great platformer (and it is, trust me), Jack gets off to a flying start. Jack can also cash-in relics found along the beaten path for added sword strength and Zen (the lifeblood for his ever-growing quiver of special moves) and absorb energy from Aku's vanquished bots on his way to becoming one extremely well-rounded video game samurai. Capitalizing on his many facets, the game is well suited to his awesome samurai-ness; this is just great level design, plain and simple. The difficulty and enemy AI ramp up just a tad on the slow

side, but you'll be too distracted to care, especially if you're a fan, taking in the show's awesome trademark vistas in smooth 3D—miles of platforming, switches, elevators, hidden rooms and clever bosses to pounce on, packed into areas that range in size and scope, stretching both vertically and horizontally. It's all in here; and if you're thinking that it all looks just a bit too low-tech, think again.

While Jack's simplistic look and true-to-the-show design may be considered sparse by some, in this case, a moving picture would be worth a thousand words. Screen captures don't do Jack for Jack. When he swings his katana, his mouth contorts with the motion; as he receives damage, his armor breaks away piece by piece, often left hanging by a thread, and simple transitions on textures, going from dirt to fallen leaves or grass, are brushed with the utmost care. Adrenium deserve scores of props for their dedication to the assembly of this game, not only for the art implementation but for the design, and the mesmerizing soundtrack that drives it all home.

Samurai Jack is exactly the game I wanted, delivered right when I needed it most...a great time with a great character in a great genre—plug and play, instant fun. Someone give these guys Shinobi and we'll call it a day. **Dave Halverson B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Adrenium/Amaze

Publisher: Sega

Available: March



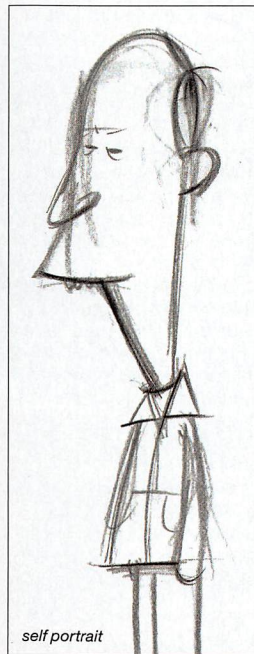
Jack's excellent swordplay is just a tiny fraction of the game's many devices.

"Samurai Jack is a big, beautiful hub-based action-platformer..."



Interview

Dan Krall Art Director **Samurai Jack**



self portrait

play: Certainly Jack is near and dear to your heart. Do you feel he's been done justice in the 3D realm? (We certainly do!)

Dan Krall: Yeah, I think Amaze did a great job translating the show into a game. They spent a lot of time studying old episodes and model sheets and then incorporated all that stuff into the game so it really feels like an extension of the show.

How did you affect the look of the game and how would you say it differs from the series other than being 3D?

I don't think I affected the look of the game very much. The guys at Amaze made pretty much the whole game and then I just came in at the last few minutes to tweak some colors and designs.

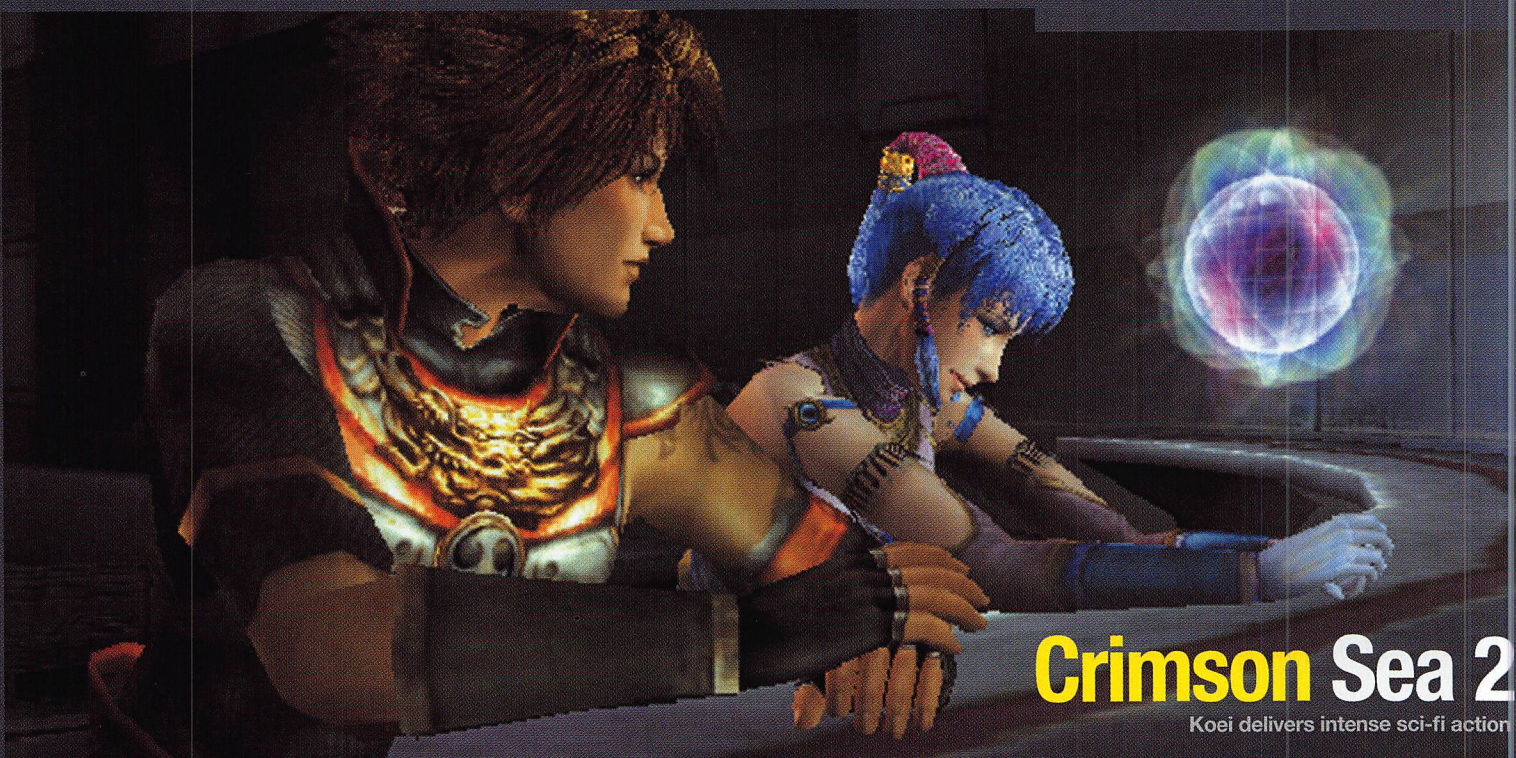
If Samurai Jack were to become a feature film, do you see it as rendered, 2D or an amalgam of both?

I'd love to see a Samurai Jack movie made, I think it'd be best as a 2D/3D hybrid kind of like the Clone Wars cartoons. The 3D stuff works great for background elements like flying cars and certain effects, but I think 2D character stuff is still a lot stronger.

Your favorite episode....

My favorite Samurai Jack episode is one that was never produced. It was a storyboard by Chris Reccardi and Aaron Springer where Jack eats some bad fish and starts to hallucinate that the fish is talking to him. The fish tells him it knows how to get Jack back to his home. So Jack grabs the stinking rotten fish and puts it in his kimono and goes where the fish tells him to go. Along the way, he runs into many unfortunate people who see their hero, Samurai Jack, out of his mind with food poisoning talking to a foul festering fish carcass that's mushed into his chest hair underneath his robe. The fish eventually leads Jack to an oasis where he "sees" his parents; right as he starts to embrace them, the effects of the food poisoning start to wear off and his parents melt and mutate in his arms and drip through his fingers. Everyone loved it, but I think it was just too messed up to make. But my favorite actual episode was a toss up between the Birth of Aku two parter, or X-49. Genndy just really went nuts on those and they seem like feature movies made for TV.

"I think Amaze did a great job translating the show into a game. They spent a lot of time studying old episodes and model sheets and then incorporated all that stuff into the game..."



I confess, I've never played the original *Crimson Sea* on Xbox—but after experiencing this PS2-exclusive sequel, I'd rather like to. Set in a deep, compelling sci-fi universe where malevolent alien hordes called The Menace are pushing humanity to the brink of destruction, *Crimson Sea 2* is the very definition of adrenaline-pumping action with a smattering of RPG-like character growth thrown in for good measure.

The secret to CS2's success lies by way of sheer variety. While the game's most basic corridor-based, bug-blasting run-and-gun action provides pretty solid gameplay, it's only the tip of the virtual iceberg. Multiple types of weapons are always by your side, including various guns and blades, and main characters Sho and Feanay can utilize an assortment of chain combos, air juggles, slow-mo Time Extend moves and awesomely devastating Neo-Psionic special attacks; and **just when you think you've seen it all, you can power up your abilities to learn even more or clear a new mission to unlock a new Neo-Psionic power.** It's all carefully honed and balanced—far more than simple button mashing—and, furthermore, harnessed by elegant controls that are adaptable for any combat situation.

Missions themselves are likewise varied, ranging from simple search-and-destroy and escort missions to more

unique challenges like fighting in the dark, where your radar is essentially the only key to success. It's too bad that there aren't more unique environments, but considering the vast number of missions—more than 60—the recycling is acceptable.

Visually, CS2 is also quite pleasing. Character designs are top-notch, the bosses impressive, and the models—both main and ancillary—are thoroughly polished. Unfortunately, the slow-mo run that compensated for a walking animation in the preview copy is still present, but other than that, the game looks great (and you won't be walking much anyway). Other touches, like bonus quests and the ability to view all the cutscenes from the first *Crimson Sea* (since most of the potentially bigger audience probably never played the original) are nice, and the multiplayer modes are icing on the cake.

Crimson Sea 2 doesn't revolutionize action gaming, but what it does, it does well...and you can't ask for much more than that. **Chris Hoffman B+**

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Koei

Publisher: Koei

Available: March

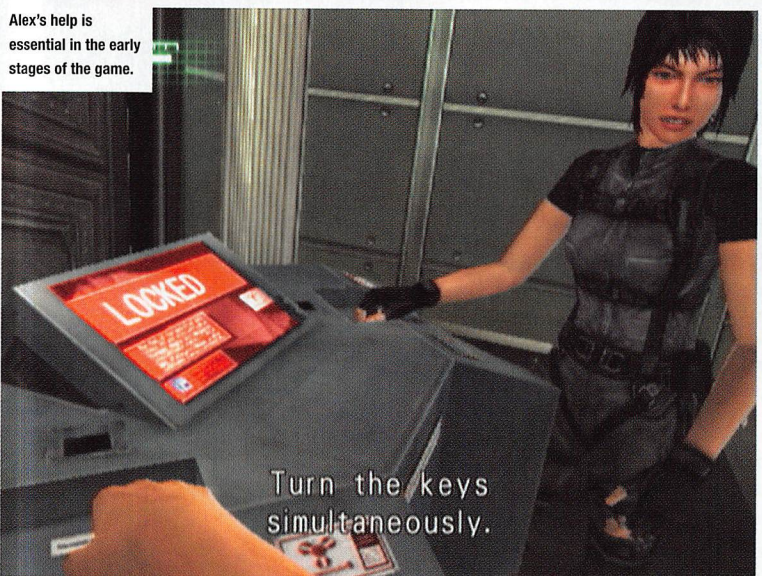


"It's all carefully honed and balanced...and, furthermore, harnessed by elegant controls that are adaptable for any combat situation."

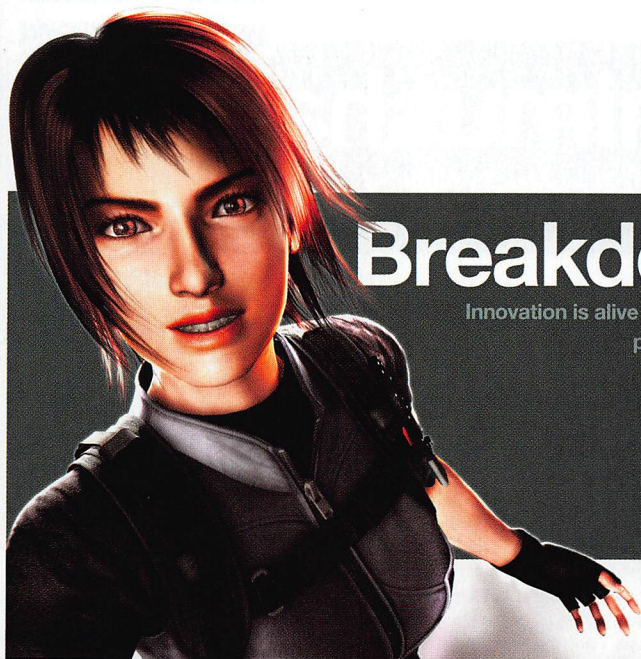
The Time Extend moves not only look cool, but also dish out extra punishment.



Alex's help is essential in the early stages of the game.



“Learn to play the game by its rules and it leads to exciting, engaging stretches of play.”



Breakdown

Innovation is alive in Namco's first-person adventure

It won't surprise me if *Breakdown* is received with widely varying opinions. Some will enjoy it for the exact reasons others might hate it. Some will appreciate its learning curve while others will find it too clumsy and traditionally framed within its reality. Some will find the obvious flaws too unforgiving, while others will work around them to experience the game's many successes.

Breakdown is ultimately a solid achievement in adding new flavor to the familiar first-person genre. Immerging from the backstory of a human experiment leading to remarkable strength and mental power in its test subject, the gameplay equally combines very strategic hand-to-hand brawling with weapons combat utilizing little more than grenades, a handgun, machine gun and rocket launcher.

Approaching a conflict point as you would a typical first-person shooter is suicide. One component you must get used to perhaps the most is the utilization of your character's ability to block both limbs and bullets with the crossing of his mysteriously glowing forearms. Eventually the strategy is mixed up even more, as you gain the ability to discharge energy blasts. The game does a good job of feeding a growing sense of empowerment, freely moving upward along with our involvement in the adventure.

It could be said that a major part of a first-person experience is being that character—playing through their eyes and, as a result, reaching a unique level of immersion. Beyond the fact that most games in this perspective go for shooting action, leaving *Breakdown* in the unique position of succeeding with first-person fighting, this innovative adventure desires an entirely new kind of immersion. When you pick anything up, examine a notepad, contact the environment to crawl or climb, even converse, the camera cleverly frames the action and shows your character's movements as if you really were viewing the

world through his eyes.

And here lies one of the major flaws. Grab a candy bar for energy: you look at it, rip it open, chew it. Pick up a dropped clip: grab it, look at it, turn it, place it in your jacket. It all looks cool at first, but then you just want these incessant animations to stop. The real hurt comes in firefights, when you desperately need the limited health or ammo and have no choice but to get nailed in the belabored process. Pacing becomes an issue too, as you see a conveniently placed line of goodies on the ground that can literally take a minute to retrieve as you sigh, watching the animation. Same goes for opening doors. At first it's kind of cool, but towards the middle half of the game, you wish for a better-planned presentation.

Learn to play the game by its rules and it leads to exciting, engaging stretches of play. One of its greatest strengths lies in the level design, which creates a labyrinthine space that feels appropriately cold and I'm-trapped-in-an-impenetrable-research-fortress-like. More variety would have been welcome, but just when you wish for more color and scenery, the game does flirt with a few outdoor sections. During the climax, you get to tool around the mountains in a jeep and run down the enemy.

The help of Alex, a female friend who joins you early on, provides an additional charge, even if her actions are occasionally dumb and unrealistic. She helps drive the story, providing a mystery and eventual connection that is solid; I was surprised at how much I enjoyed getting her back on my side after losing her to a falling elevator. Nothing can rescue the banalities of the story: oh no, the military is yet again up to no good. Oh well...not every game is a masterpiece, but *Breakdown* is certainly a good one. **Brady Fiechter B**

System: Xbox
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: March

Onimusha

Blade Warriors

Although Onimusha: Blade Warriors is technically a fighting game, it might be more accurate to describe it as an action title cast from an arena-fighting game mold. As you hack, slash, kick and incinerate waves of enemies in each stage, it quickly becomes apparent that Blade Warriors is more about the visceral fun of chopping through Nobunaga's undead legions than it is about serious, strategic confrontation. That's not detrimental by definition—but the way it's done here might quickly leave players wishing for something more.

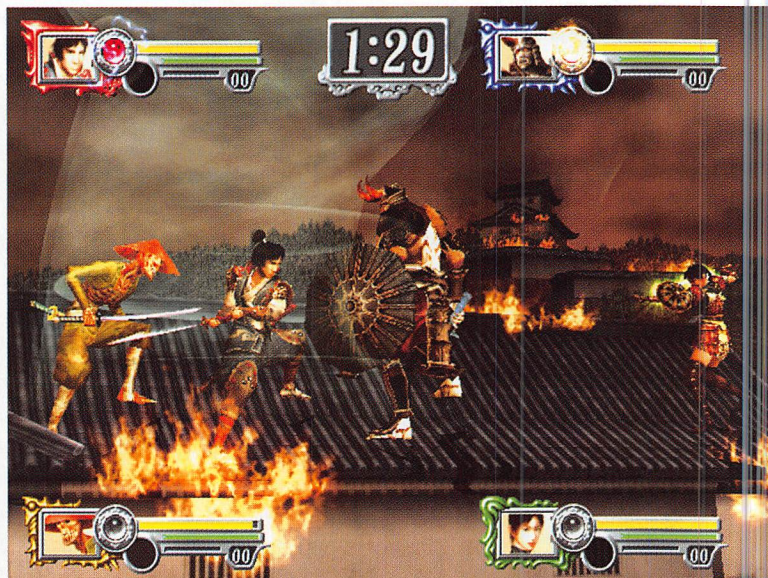
The energetic combat is a blast at first, especially in multiplayer versus mode. Blade Warriors delivers big on its premise, putting all of the key heroes and villains from Onimusha 1 and 2—including Samanosuke and Jubei, together at last, plus some very cool unlockable fighters—into fast, fluid, high-intensity, multi-opponent battles, bursting with screen-filling magic attacks, ability-boosting power-ups and an assortment of weapons. The game looks great as well; characters are well modeled and textured, and the atmospheric, creative environments bristle with beautiful touches like dancing flames, swaying fields of wheat and sliceable bamboo shoots.

But as pretty and nice as the surface is, the gameplay beneath is surprisingly shallow. The not-entirely-a-fighting-game sentiment reveals itself: the characters all control and feel the same, and there are essentially no special moves to speak of. If you've played one character, you've pretty much played them all—which makes for some repetitive gameplay when the only way to unlock all of the secret characters and extra items is to play through the game over and over and over again. By the time I had finished the 20-level bonus area, I was almost ready to surrender to Nobunaga and his Genma forces.

Another aspect that could use improvement is the character voices. Any time a game is set in ancient Japan, an option for Japanese voices would be greatly appreciated...even more so when Samanosuke's victory quote sounds borrowed from the X-Men's Wolverine.

Blade Warriors' unique breed of fighting can be fun; it's just too bad there isn't more to it. Anyone who isn't an Onimusha connoisseur or a multiplayer fanatic might be best renting first. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: March



Hidden characters
 Mega Man.EXE and
 Zero are even more
 fun to control than the
 Onimusha cast.



"Blade Warriors' unique breed of fighting can be fun; it's just too bad there isn't more to it."

Pitfall

The Lost Expedition

Back in the swing of things

Welcome to part two of happy platformer month. As if Samurai Jack wasn't enough hoppity joy to fill my Feb, Pitfall: The Lost Expedition turned out to be a bona fide mini epic: part Indy Jones and part Mario clone, a free-form action-adventure spilling over with platforming goodness, depth and originality. Slipping gaming's longest-running action franchise into a cartoon coating (even if he does look like a super deformed Brendan Fraser) has proven a wise move by Activision, almost as wise as assigning Edge of Reality the task of reigniting a flame long extinguished. The game is absolutely gorgeous (especially on Xbox) and rife with play mechanics and cool adventuring gear, cleverly tethered to Harry's right arm via the right analog, allowing him to pluck items from his pack to utilize in one seamless motion—an extremely cool take on adventuring mechanics.

The game overall is set up much like a platforming-oriented Metroid: a single vast, branching sprawl that opens up as you attain items to venture further...like torches to burn webs, special moves to clear chasms or reach high places, a sling to dizzy enemies or set up jumps, a gas mask to brave insurmountable fumes and so on. All the while, the game's

surprisingly intriguing (yet entirely cheeky) story unfolds as Harry works to unravel a slew of quandaries ranging from the lost treasures of El Dorado to blending in with the natives, trying to figure out a peculiar talking jaguar and, of course, saving the girl(s). Staying true to the namesake, this revolves around tried and true Pitfall staples: swinging on vines, jumping chasms, fending off scorpions and other jungle beasts and, of course, using crocodiles as springboards. All of which are expertly incorporated into the mix. Forget that Bruce Campbell thing; this should be the standard mold from which all future Pitfalls are cast. Every aspect of this latest installment works: the comedy, the characters, the Tomb-Raider-meets-Indiana-Jones satire. And, moreover, the gameplay is back where it belongs: swinging from the trees.

A surprisingly adept mix of tight platforming, cool character design and the kind of evolving play mechanics that keep you coming back for more, Pitfall Harry is indeed back and, dare I say, better than ever.

Dave Halverson B

System: Xbox (reviewed), PS2, GC
Developer: Edge of Reality
Publisher: Activision
Available: February



Easily one of the most f'd-up looking characters in recent memory. Pretty cool, eh?



"...a free-form action-adventure spilling over with platforming goodness, depth and originality."

Dead Man's Hand

An eye for an eye...head, chest, leg...

The most underutilized motif in all of gaming will get two kicks at the can in the first half of 2004, beginning with Humanhead Studio's *Dead Man's Hand*, a game so crammed with bad intentions it should come packed in a tiny pine casket. Shot in the back and left for dead, El Tejon is out for revenge against his old gang, "The Nine," with a very special bullet in the chamber for leader and one-time mentor Tennessee Vic. If you've ever dreamt of cutting through outlaw trash, FPS style, your train has entered the station. Revenge hasn't been this sweet since *Kill Bill*.

Riding on the tired Unreal engine, it's amazing how much Humanhead have managed to squeeze from its dated tool set. Vast fortified canyons appear realistically chiseled and decayed, dank underground mines and old caves crumble and creak like the real thing, and literally everything and anything able to move, from the innards of saloons to lanterns to crates to structure supports, are assigned realistic physics, ready to pulverize all comers with a little coaxing from your gun barrel. Paired with the joyously spastic rag-doll effects as you cap outlaws through windows and blow the hats (and skulls) off mountain men, the overall feel of *Dead Man's Hand* is decidedly Old West, sinking into the saddle behind the gentle whistling of the wind behind a rockabilly requiem that sounds like a Dick Dale death dirge.



"...so crammed with bad intentions it should come packed in a tiny pine casket."

Keeping it real on the gameplay side, there's more than one way to skin a cowboy: trick shots pay ample dividends, and there are plenty of ways to call on the reaper, including shot chains, hat shots, knife kills, explosive kills, projectile kills and the always satisfying crush kills. The level design is somewhat reminiscent of *Turok* (the Cowboy Hunter!)—standard FPS broken up by good AI, with lots of dense duck-and-cover to dig in for long-range scope attacks. In between, clever diversions like levels on horseback (one of the game's high points), hijacking trains and riding mining cars keep things fresh as you make your way through painstakingly authentic locales, edging ever closer to each member of the gang—guys with names like Flat Iron, Kansas Jack and Numbers, in scenarios such as "Lead and Whiskey" and "Hell for Leather." How this game scored a Teen rating I'll never know (I capped more realistic-looking hombres at close range than I care to remember...not that they didn't deserve it). But it's all done in good taste true to the guise. The Nine themselves are formidable bosses each with a hook all his own, from TNT tossers to axe throwers to fallen preachers with a penchant for burning flesh.

Hitches come by way of a frame rate that takes a hit in some of the larger wildernesses (mostly when rotating rather than moving forward) and a few minor AI miscues, but given the authenticity at work and the detail of the models within the engine's capabilities, they're barely worth mentioning. Most of the time, DMH runs fast and fluid. If you're feeling a touch of déjà vu, it's for good reason. We reviewed *Dead Man's Hand* (less favorably) some issues back when Atari mistakenly marked the preview copy as review code. We were happy to hear it was a mistake given the game's potential, which, as you've likely gathered, has been reached. *Dead Man's Hand* isn't just another FPS for the pile. As promised, it's a down-and-dirty Western first-person adventure, begging for a sequel fueled by an engine with more horsepower and, with a little luck, a Tejon with a view. **Dave Halverson B**



System: Xbox
Developer: Humanhead Studios
Publisher: Atari
Available: April

Ragdoll physics in effect...arms flail, heads snap back; but you gotta shoot them hats off.

Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent **A**
Good **B**
Fair **C**
Poor **D**
Worthless **F**



Game of the Month

» Ninja Gaiden p 052

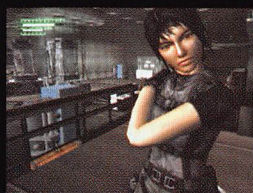
"What Team Ninja have achieved is no less than a modern miracle..."

Also notice...



Crimson Sea 2
p 058

More than just another bug hunt? You better believe it. The nuanced fighting techniques run incredibly deep in this PS2-exclusive sequel.



Breakdown
p 059

Namco combines first-person brawling and gunplay with this innovative, immersing adventure.



Colin McRae Rally 04

The best game ever launched at \$19.99? Most assuredly. Perhaps Codemasters are looking to recruit more drivers to experience the authenticity they keep improving on time and time again, in search of the truest possible virtual racing experience. With McRae 04, they bring the same measure of depth, with an added expert mode to really push the select few dedicated to shaving off every last second, along with Live capabilities to keep a constant eye on how they measure up in the world rankings. New additions aside, it's all about the whirl of the engines and perfectly pitched instructions from your co-pilot as you bear down on what can only be described as a near-perfect representation of the physics challenge rally racing really is.

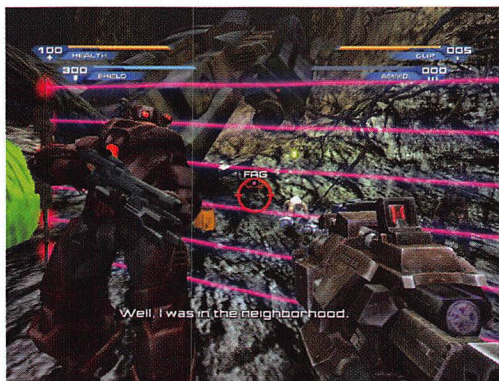
Dave Halverson B+

System: Xbox
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: March



It just doesn't get much more realistic than this. Where they take it from here is anyone's guess.

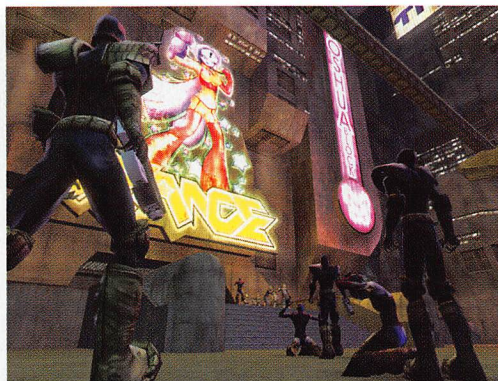




Unreal II: The Awakening

Unreal II: The Awakening's biggest fault is the lifeless visual design: the use of color is ugly at times, the enemies aren't appealing and move clunkily, exhibiting spotty AI to add to the flaws. The good: there's enough intensity and decent level design—indoor areas are much more enjoyable than outdoors—to keep things moving along enough to hold the interest of the hardest of the hardcore fan of the genre, and some of the later missions show hints of creativity. Problem is, good setups often fall flat without any creative execution. Technical flaws pop up as well, and effects are limited. If there is any redeeming grace, it's the XMP multiplayer aspects, but there isn't enough value here alone to justify a purchase. **Brady Fiechter C**

System: Xbox
Developer: Tantalus/Legend Software
Publisher: Atari
Available: February



Judge Dredd: Dredd vs. Death

The first 3D console game that really hit home for me was Alien vs. Predator for the Atari Jaguar, skillfully crafted by a small European developer named Rebellion. All these years later, and here they are still cranking out quality first-person shooters, albeit under the radar. They may not have a "cutting-edge" engine, but these guys really know how to create tension and atmosphere and lay down great level design. They do Dredd right, feeding directly off the comic book designs, and although the models aren't technically extravagant, the composition is outstanding in terms of nailing the look of the Dredd universe and its characters. The adventure-added gameplay is pure Dredd too, and the story—Dark Judges have risen—very cool. **Dave Halverson B**

System: Xbox
Developer: Rebellion
Publisher: Evolved Games
Available: March



Worms 3D

If Worms 3D were the first attempt at the comical, hugely original idea of pitting worms in a war of meticulous strategy, it may have left a much bigger impact. As it is, the game loses some of the fun by adding the clogged 3D presentation. Use of certain weapons and locomotion across the map can be cumbersome, and the game just doesn't have that same pendulum energy of before in the fights. Presentation is a hindrance; you have to leave a little too much up to chance depending on the position points on the map. To its credit, the game is still good fun and does more than enough right, especially appealing for Worm fans searching for a fresh look at the series. **Brady Fiechter B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GC, PC
Developer: Team 17
Publisher: Acclaim
Available: February



Seven Samurai 20XX

I think a lot of people (especially those who can still appreciate a good action game) are going to be pleasantly surprised by Samurai 20XX for its deep fighting, exceptional character design and architecture and progressive story, in synch with the classic film, only brought into a neo-industrial realm. The game is exceptionally well produced—almost seamlessly segueing in and out of spoken dialogue and story breaks—and has a strong script brought to life by seasoned anime and voice-over professionals. Sammy have always been a strong, independent developer/publisher, but 2004 may be their best year thus far. With 20XX out now and Spy Fiction in the works, both barrels are loaded. Someone ought to make this movie. **Dave Halverson B**

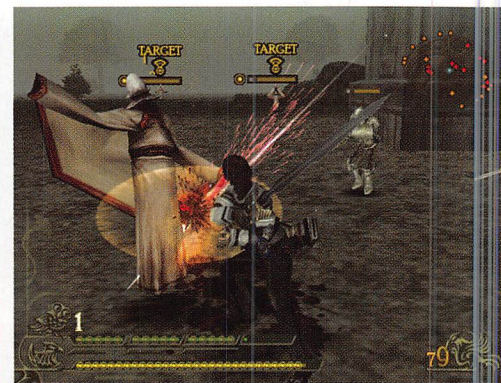
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Dimps
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Available: March



Firefighter F.D.18

Discarding typical action game conventions, Firefighter F.D.18 makes good on its promise to deliver a thoroughly unique experience and manages to look impressive doing it; this concept has never met with as much visual success as it does here. There are no typical enemies to fight, no chasms to jump—just you and your equipment against the soulless, unrelenting, all-consuming flame that burns without remorse. While the unconventional action is definitely enticing and polished, it is a bit limited, and the game also suffers from some cheap scripted events that yield trial-and-error gameplay. Nonetheless, very creative bosses and a worthwhile backstory make Firefighter well worth checking out for anyone with the slightest interest in the premise. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: March



Drakengard

Although Drakengard seems to draw inspiration from both Dynasty Warriors and Panzer Dragoon, the end result doesn't come close to either. The main problem with the game is that it gets old really fast—sure, there are plenty of weapons, but little in the way of moves, which means that the (often very lengthy) melee portions are just prolonged sessions of button-mashing with the occasional magic spell. Mounting the dragon is cool, but again there's not much to it—incinerate your opponents ad infinitum. Things get better in the pure airborne dragon stages, but they sadly make up only a small portion of the game. Combined with bland environments and a story that's more melodramatic than dark, Drakengard fails to live up to its potential. **Chris Hoffman C**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: cavia
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: March

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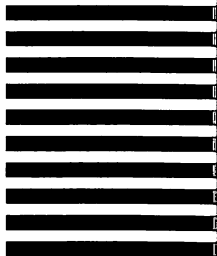
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Unreal Tournament 2004

Preview

The veteran shooter franchise reloads

Epic's original Unreal was a triumph of technology, crushing the graphics of any PC game at the time. Compared to id's Quake 2, however, Unreal's multiplayer game was really lacking. So the following year, Epic returned fire with a furious barrage of multiplayer excellence in the form of Unreal Tournament. After pushing their engine even further, Epic handed the next update over to Digital Extremes, resulting in UT 2003. Although embraced by players and heavily supported, spawning several mod packs and dozens of clan communities, where the sequel excelled in level and graphic design, it also fell slightly short in overall depth and content. This looks to be remedied

(and then some) in the upcoming sequel, Unreal Tournament 2004. Epic is back at the helm, and in conjunction with Digital Extremes, they're cramming tons of new content into this year's edition.

Right off, UT 2004 will have over 95 maps available, ranging from gritty industrial warehouses to huge outdoor valleys and ruins and even deep space. Hearing the call of fans, Epic has implemented 10 big gameplay modes, including an enhanced Assault mode where teams take turns being Attacker or Defender in highly designed levels with specific goals. Also, the classic Deathmatch (1-on-1 or Team) and Last Man Standing modes return, along with genre-standard Capture the Flag, Mutant

mode (where the first fragger becomes the hunted), Bombing Run (a pseudo-football contest with goals on either end of the map) and Double Domination where teams score for briefly capturing two Control Points. In the cooperative Invasion mode, players defend their turf against waves of invading monsters, including some savage classics back from the original Unreal. Finally, the all-new Onslaught mode is absolutely awesome: showcasing vehicular combat and epic outdoor environments, teams take over and defend "nodes" in a connect-the-dots fashion across the map until the opposing team's power core is at last vulnerable to attack. And to help hone your skills for online play, UT 2004 has a deep single-player campaign featuring every game mode, new characters (and grudges), improved AI and team management and multiple endings.

The entire armory from UT 2003 has been ported over, and 2004 welcomes the addition of the "AVRIL" (anti-vehicle rocket launcher), the Mine Layer, with an alternate mode that transforms the mine into a spider-like tracer bomb that chases after enemies, and the unconventional Grenade Launcher with explosives that adhere to infantry and vehicles, detonating on command using the alt-fire. The venerated Sniper Rifle from the original Unreal Tournament is back, primed for pinpoint headshots, but it's been "camper" cheese-proofed with a distinct lightning beam that immediately reveals the shooter's position. Beginners beware, though: Unreal vets will tear you

apart with these weapons. Learning the intricacies of double dodging, wall jumps, adrenaline combos and each weapon's unique secondary properties will keep you on your feet instead of in pieces.

UT 2004 introduces vehicular combat in earnest, with lethal single-seat blasters and bombers like the Warthog-style Scorpion, deceptively nasty Manta hovercraft and the sky-dominating Raptor. The maneuverable Hellbender heavy truck seats three: a driver and two gunners manning unique anti-vehicle and infantry cannons. The plodding two-seat Goliath tank can dish out and absorb massive damage, while the fully-loaded five-seat Leviathan, which, according to game lore, once leveled an entire city on its own, is the most fearsome sight on the battlefield. To compliment the extreme ordnance, all particle effects and explosions have been enhanced and optimized.

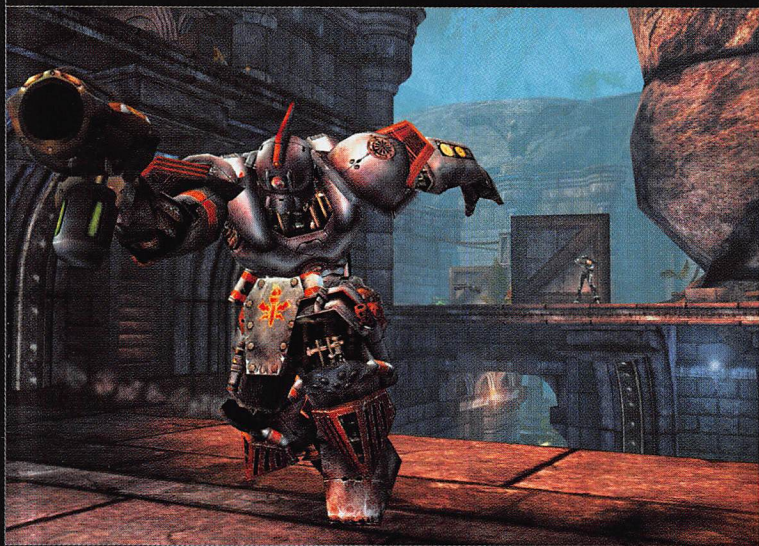
In a bid to secure the multiplayer shooter crown, Epic Games is outfitting Unreal Tournament 2004 with a tremendous amount of content and a variety of gameplay that very purposefully covers all bases for the next year. Some fan favorites from the original UT are back, and the second generation Unreal engine still looks great, with plenty of scalable options for low- to high-end machines. If it's a fragfest you crave, UT 2004 might surface as the complete package. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Epic Games

Publisher: Atari

Available: March

"If it's a fragfest you crave, UT 2004 might surface as the complete package."



Guild Wars

Review

Part 2 of our in-depth look

What happens when the creator and architect of Blizzard's Battle.net, the ex-team lead and main programmer of World of Warcraft and the senior programmer of Diablo and Warcraft 2 come together to make their own game? Guild Wars is born. Along with a staff of massive talent groomed at LucasArts, Square, EA, Valve and Cavedog, the ArenaNet team is developing a decidedly streamlined online RPG experience, though trimmed of tedium and wasteful downtime, still

loaded with gameplay depth and remarkable visuals. In part two of our interview with co-founder Jeff Strain, we explore a gamut of play mechanics from skills to quests, group and tournament dynamics, and we reveal ArenaNet's plans for Guild Wars' innovative streaming technology.

Mike Griffin

Developer: ArenaNet
Publisher: NCsoft
Available: 2nd half 2004

Interview Part 2

Jeff Strain co-founder and programmer **ArenaNet**

play: Guild Wars is a "competitive online role-playing game." Surely there's more to melee combat than hitting auto-attack and watching the show?

Jeff Strain: Selecting a target and going to lunch would not be very competitive! No, think of combat as a real-time game of Magic: The Gathering. You have a certain selection of skills that you have chosen to bring into the mission. Strategic use of your skills, including optimal timing, energy management, spatial positioning and creating combos with your teammates is essential. You will be making split-second decisions in combat, as the creatures in Guild Wars are quite crafty and have access to many of the same skills that you do. A good player will be able to adapt quickly as his opponents try new strategies.

Spell-casting in any RPG invariably incurs a resource or time penalty. How is magic use being handled in Guild Wars?

There are several balancing factors, including recharge time, energy cost, en-

ergy upkeep, and the limited-use "world enchantments." Recharge time is the period that you must wait before recasting some skills, such as the Warrior's Sprint skill (run speed boost). Energy cost is simply the fixed amount of energy a skill costs to cast. Energy upkeep modifies your energy recharge rate. Some skills have heavy upkeep costs, and some have none. Upkeep is usually applied to "buff" and "debuff" skills, such as the Monk's Retribution skill (returns 25 percent of incoming melee damage back at the wielder). Some world enchantment skills, such as the Ranger's Frozen Soil (prevents resurrection), may only be cast a limited number of times per mission, and must be saved for maximum tactical impact.

Will a player with significantly better items always have a clear advantage over someone with inferior items?

There are certainly quality differences in armor and weapons, and for a time you will generally have better equipment as you progress through the game. However,

"The real benefit to us...is that we have an unprecedented ability to modify the world over time, in both small and large ways."

in keeping with our goal of making a game of player skill, rather than just time invested, you will reach Ascension fairly early in the game. This is the point beyond which you are not getting strictly more powerful, and although you will still be finding new armor, new weapons, new skills and new toys, you will be gaining strategic diversity as opposed to raw power. Remember that skills in Guild Wars do not follow the standard RPG model of a spell tree, or spell levels, but instead are more similar to Magic cards in that no skill is universally more powerful than another. Each skill has a tactical benefit, cost and counter effect, and will be most useful when effectively combined with other skills in a designed strategy.

Will dual-profession characters have access to the abilities of either archetype?

A dual-profession character will have access to all of the skills in his chosen secondary profession, and will have access to the unique weapons of that profession. However, the character will not be able to wear armor from the secondary profession, and some unique attributes may not be available. For example, a Ranger has a stealth attribute that is unique to the profession, but a Monk choosing Ranger as a secondary profession would not have access to that attribute. Fundamentally, a Ranger-Monk will appear and play quite differently from a Monk-Ranger.

How is a mission's difficulty level balanced for a group of different-level players?

We do not "auto-balance" missions to account for the makeup of a party, because missions are not just collections of creatures that can be scaled up or down on

demand, but are instead highly designed quests that can be solved in numerous ways. Each mission will be designed for players of a specific level, but with Ascension in Guild Wars arriving relatively early for players, a good portion of the content can be aimed at a similar level range.

Will missions have specific goals, storylines and lore attached to them?

Yes, absolutely. In one mission, for example, your party might need to escort a supply train across the mountain pass, and protection of the cargo and passengers is your highest priority. In another, you may need to infiltrate the camp of an opposing army and steal a specific artifact. The mission structure supports a broad and very complex story arc, which constitutes the first chapter in the Guild Wars saga. As we release expansions through the years, this story will continue to unfold and evolve.

How is character death being handled in Guild Wars?

When you die you incur a Death Penalty, which is expressed as a negative modifier on your maximum energy and health. Each time you die, this penalty increases somewhat. However, the Death Penalty is only active for the duration of the mission and has no permanent effect on your character. Under no circumstances will we ever penalize you by permanently taking away items or experience, nor will you ever have to spend hours searching for your corpse. We simply do not think that is fun.

What kind of durability system and customization is in place for weapons and equipment?

There is no item durability system in Guild Wars. This is another entry into the "not fun" category for us. Who wants to feel guilty every time you use that cool new Sword of Fury because you're worried

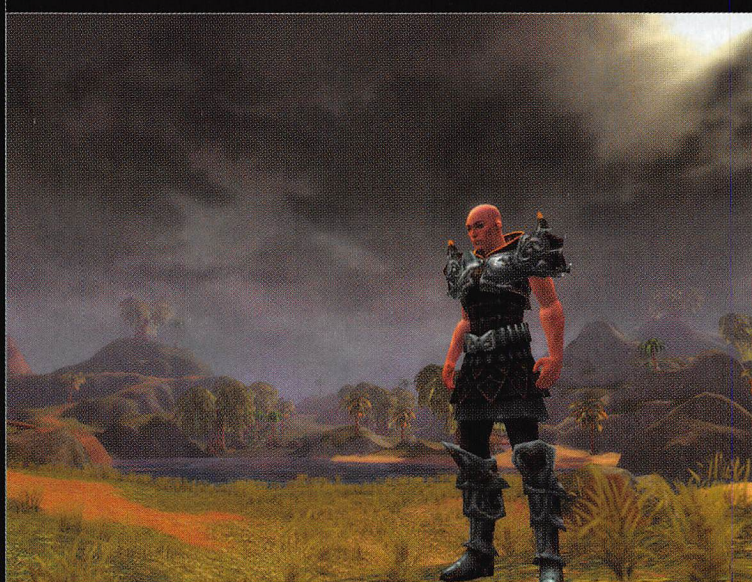
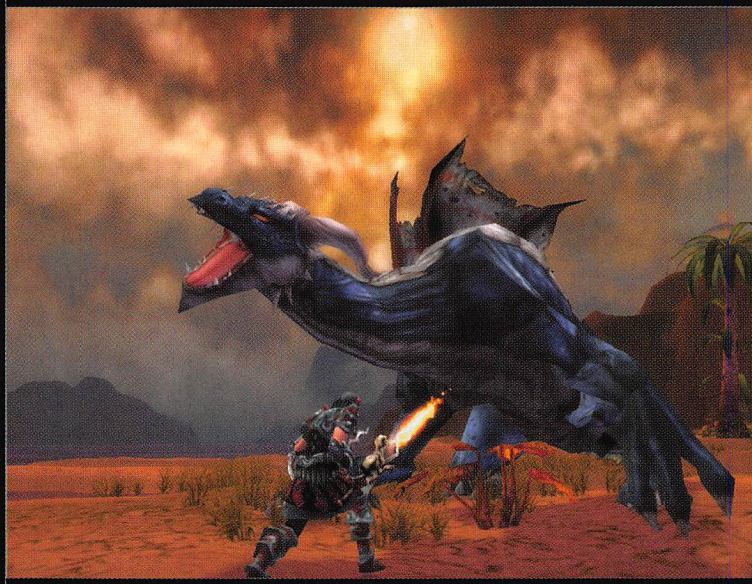
about wearing it out? You will be able to dye any of your armor or weapons using dyes that are found throughout the world, and you can even mix dyes to form your own "secret recipe" for custom colors. In addition, some very powerful items will not be active until you "infuse" them with a certain item, at which time they are bound to you and can no longer be sold or traded.

The "Guild Wars" name is inspired by a planned tournament system. Tell us about the implementation of these global competitions.

There will be many large-scale tournaments with support for thousands of simultaneous competitors running continuously in our Guild Wars world. Once you form your party and enter a tournament, you will be placed in a series of PvP battles, each with a unique objective. Every victory brings you closer to the ultimate goal of winning that tournament and remaining at the top for as long as you can. In addition to tournament standings, we plan to implement a ladder and ranking system that will evaluate players and guilds on a wide range of parameters. Besides the obvious win/loss record, we may track and award victory bonuses based on handicap, i.e., did you pull off a win with a party of newbie characters, or did you rely on your battle-hardened A-team to achieve your goals?

How flexible is Guild Wars' streaming system?

The secret of the Guild Wars streaming technology is that we don't treat all the game info on your hard drive as one specific patch level entity. Instead, each individual art and sound asset has its own version number, and as you play the game, the client and the file server work together to determine what you are about to see. If you do not have a specific required asset, the file server will



create a custom delta patch with just the information needed to patch it on the fly, based on a number of factors including your progression through the mission structure. Most downloading takes place in the background transparently, minimizing downtime, as the game and server efficiently use idle bandwidth while you play.

How does this technology affect your design and business model?

The real benefit to us from a design standpoint is that we have an unprecedented ability to modify the world over time, in both small and large ways. We do not need to wait three months to address a critical exploit or balance flaw for fear of breaking something else, nor do we need to schedule a monthly update that requires players to suffer through a long download screen when they want to

start playing. It enables us to finally ditch the subscription fee business model. Because we see the game as a collection of individual assets, rather than a monolithic version level, we can stream art and sound to your system, even if you have not purchased it. This gives you the choice to purchase only what is interesting to you, since you will still be able to see new items from chapters that your friends have purchased, and will therefore still be able to play with them.

Thanks to Jeff and the ArenaNet team for the sneak peek and superior minutiae. Guild Wars may be exactly what online role-playing needs in 2004, offering a formula that will entice new players to enter the genre while winning over vets through style, convenience and the allure of truly global, skills-based competition.





Dark and Light

Review

This quiet contender attempts to do it all

Six years into the maturation of the genre in the mainstream, we find developers making very deliberate design choices in the realm of massively multiplayer online role-playing game creation. There are some who share ArenaNet's vision: with Guild Wars, they are crafting a faster game that promotes skill-based objectives and quickly accessed content, reacting to the pervasive complaint that this genre is far too time consuming. Some developers, such as Blizzard and their much-anticipated World of Warcraft, will target the perceived middle ground: creating instanced dungeons and objectives for short bursts of casual play while also offering epic, character life-spanning quests. At the other end of the spectrum lies Dark and Light: Vincent Pourieux and fellow NP Cube team members are responsible for this unabashedly grandiose undertaking that aims to enthrall its entire player base simultaneously in one enormous and seamless world of PvP warfare, politics, strategy and vast exploration.

The world of Ganareth was once united and at peace. Small villages grew into cities, and eventually great kingdoms were established, flourishing for centuries. Scholars and wisemen, now mages, learned to harness the strange power of the moon's alabaster glow into magic, and opulent temples of arcane study were raised. Soon the people became restless and they decided to use their mages to push through the wilderness with magical force, mercilessly unraveling

and destroying the natural order. Such trespassing would not proceed without divine punishment, and a massive cataclysm shattered the moon. Two moons were born: one shadowed and one clear. Fierce dragons fought back on behalf of nature, retaking the stolen lands. Unable to wield their magic, the people were forced to flee into two large regions, building fortresses and barricading towns to hide within. Two sprawling capital cities emerged from each realm, opposed to each other in belief and principle, and hostile territorial lines were drawn. The old scholars returned and swore allegiance to their previous leaders, now at odds, and soon discovered ways to capture the unique celestial magic of each new moon: one city seized the shaded power of the Dark moon, and the other embraced the ethereal gleam of the Light moon.

Based on your selection of one of the 12 races and 14 classes, you will find yourself on the side of Dark or Light. Despite common stereotypes, in this game neither faction is plainly good or evil, although the Dark is more apt to practice necromantic magic, while the Light emphasizes charms and enchanting. Both sides will vie for control of 10 kingdoms, each containing several counties and baronies, literally thousands of outposts and fortresses and over 200 main cities. And all of this will be contained in a single, completely seamless, 15,000 square-mile game world for every player. "Dark and Light uses a combination of two very new technologies," explains Vincent Pourieux,



R&D Manager and co-founder of NP Cube, "a totally procedural display engine and a cell-based server engine. The management of tens of thousands of players is primarily controlled by the server engine, which requires sophisticated next-generation server equipment, but is playable with a 56k connection on the player's side."

Using a raw topographical database system that automatically applies the correct altitude, colors and vegetation type to the environment, the Mafate engine then renders the results in procedural steps, and as Pourieux assured us, "There is always a real horizon that you can travel towards"—stretching the continuous view distance to over 30 miles in any given direction. Of course, at maximum range the landscape won't use optimal textures, but the encompassing effect is nonetheless quite stunning. This same procedural technology automates weather and the

changing of seasons, displaying wind, rain and snow with unique velocity and temperature values. Strong winds will sway grass and trees (and even smaller characters), while snowfall will visibly accumulate and build up on the ground, tree branches and buildings. Extreme weather and temperatures will often modify player stats and movement or trigger migration patterns in animals, and entire counties covered in snow during the winter will naturally change complexion as time transitions into the summer season. Rules are in place for certain areas, such as mountainous regions several thousand feet in altitude, where snow will never melt—and you will be able to identify such areas, miles away. Besides the fascinating visual immersion afforded by the breadth of such effects, quests and unique crafted items will be linked to certain geography and weather conditions, while the two

Commentary by Vincent Pourieux, R&D Manager and co-founder, NP Cube

moons, shooting stars and other celestial phenomena like rare comets will affect magic use and trigger special events.

With such a gargantuan and active land to explore, and the allure of cross-kingdom player-versus-player battles or complex resource trading and politics, how does one travel and make progress? "With our huge world, we decided to give players lots of transportation options," Pourieux told us. "We have hot air balloons, suspended cable cars, giant dragons for long-distance mass transport, Yabs (huge oxen-driven carts), snow surfing on shields, delta gliders, Dodo and other animal mounts, and personal dragons for higher level players, with more planned." All classes will be able to teleport to their hometown, while a handful of Mana Fountains at key crossroads will function as teleport points (and, not surprisingly, improve mana renewal) for whichever side is currently in possession of that territory. Players will have two very distinct and valid progress indicators: Fighting experience and Social experience. Your Fighting experience will obviously come from victory versus players or NPCs, whether engaging in mass melee on an open-plains battlefield or adventuring alone beneath the rich canopy of a giant forest. You will have many combat skills and spells to acquire and expand in the game's original branching advancement system. Social experience will also progress as you eliminate enemies from the opposing alignment and seize new land, but you will lose Social favor for killing those who are much weaker than you—eventually earning a "Wanted" status. Finally, if grand PvP skirmishes and

political posturing carries no interest for you, dozens of exploration and discovery quests will be available with suitable Social rewards, and, for the crafting fiend, over 40 dedicated trade professions. The hardcore resource hunter can set up lucrative delivery cart waypoints between mines and town markets, and, based on Social level, hire NPC mercenaries to protect the valuable cargo in transit. A higher Social level wrought by any means will eventually lead to nobility and the power to command fortresses and towns across the Kingdom, enticing players into the Dark and Light conflict regardless of chosen gameplay path.

Dark and Light is certainly one of the most ambitious designs in the genre right now. Despite the incredible size of this living game world and the absurd amount of proposed content, the NP Cube team, loaded with industry vets, boasts a rather fearless approach to such a daunting project. They have found dozens of elegant solutions to many undesirable features that have plagued the genre for years, while incorporating progression options for virtually every type of RPG player. And perhaps most admirably, they have never strayed from their vision of gathering every player in the same Ganareth world together. The next major hurdle in Dark and Light development is stability testing under a heavy load, where this remarkable engine and server technology will finally be pressed into serious action.

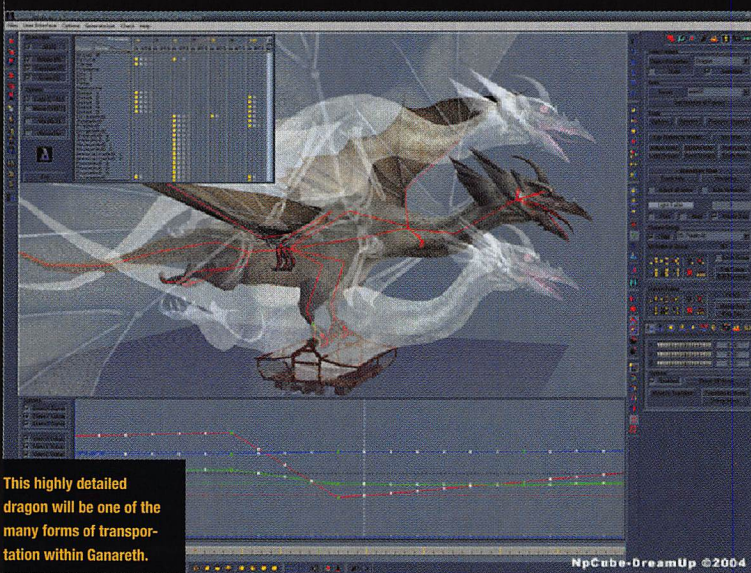
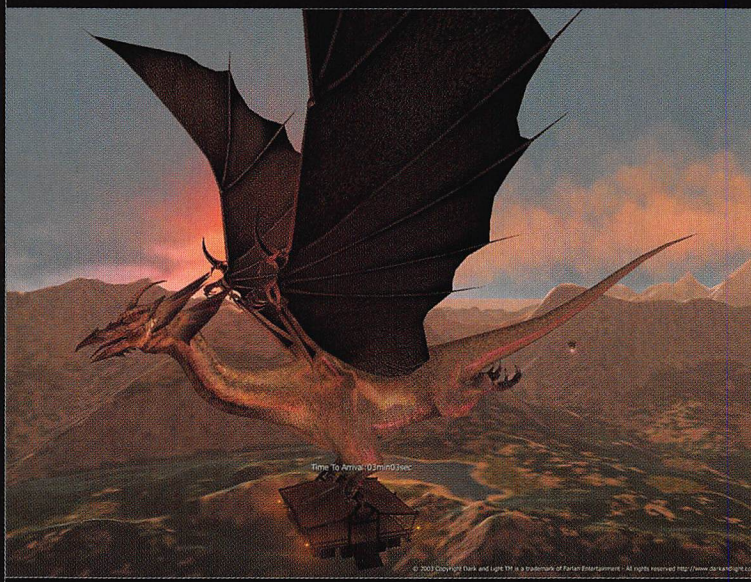
Mike Griffin

Developer: NP Cube

Publisher: Farlan Entertainment

Available: Q3 2004

"And all of this will be contained in a single, completely seamless, 15,000 square-mile game world for every player."



This highly detailed dragon will be one of the many forms of transportation within Ganareth.

NpCube-DreamUp ©2004

Gangland

Review

A strategic mafia takeover

Our fascination with exaggerated mafia violence and the perverse glory of promotion (at any cost) within their ranks continues, or so the demographics and sales would indicate. Media Mobsters chimes in with a decidedly RTS approach to their mafia adventure, Gangland, and despite touting it as a generous mélange of other established genres from action to role-playing, the gameplay is clearly dominated by resource and property management.

The Gangland saga rolls out through an event-driven plot system. The Sicilian Mafia is welcoming four brothers to Paradise City, where the money is green and the girls are pretty...corrupted. There's no family unity though; the brothers are operating solo, and out to kill each other as they rise through the criminal web. Angelo is the youngest brother, a charismatic leader who dislikes violence but brandishes a shotgun when he must. Sonny, on the other hand, is a wild gunman, a poor leader but excellent businessman who intimidates by dual-wielding vicious twin Tommy guns. Mario is the second eldest, and despite his poor aim with a machine gun, he creates partnerships with confidence. Romano is the eldest brother, a superb businessman and deadly with a sniper rifle, but he's not a fit man and his stamina suffers accordingly. As a new player in Paradise City, you start very low in the mobster ranks, running errands for your Uncle Vincenzo while accumulating henchman and territory with any extra cash you make. You'll be exposed to

Vincenzo's competition and learn how to extort businesses and convert buildings into guarded safe houses, allowing supplies such as ammunition, booze and medicine to enter, and be used by, your organization. This is important knowledge and power that your brother will apply to his future, when he no longer operates in the shadow of his crime-boss uncle.

Gangland looks great on paper, but it doesn't quite deliver all aspects of its proposed genre-blending with equal fervor. The mission system is standard formula: objectives are marked on the map, and you navigate a decent-looking city from a 180-degree overhead perspective using a slightly clumsy interface and control scheme. It feels good for resource management and territory monitoring, but rather stiff and cumbersome for the gunfight melee that you frequently engage in. An attempt at reflexive combat comes in the form of line of sight—using the environment for ducking cover—but the concept has difficulty flourishing within a system of rigid Diablo-style character movement and dubious AI pathing. Concentrate on the slower RTS and character-building portions, and Gangland impresses with its considerable depth. All the characters in your crime ring gain experience and level up their combat skills and improve their gear. Your chosen brother can get married and have kids, and the profession of your offspring (such as a lawyer, who is adept at establishing street connections) impacts your business. The city around you is teeming with activity as day to night cycles flow by, complete

with lighting and shadow effects, and both citizens and law enforcement will react to any overt public violence on your part. Whatever illicit deeds you conduct under the umbrella of your empire won't concern Paradise City's corrupt police force as long as you pay those cop bribes. Amid all of this cyclical resource and rank building, reactive events are dynamically spawned to quickly alter the scope of activity and balance. These sudden pace changes are especially impacting on Gangland's multiplayer game, where each side vies for real estate and economic control of the map. A slight variation in the supply

chain can have immediate side effects. In both single and multiplayer, Gangland rates your combat statistics and business prowess in many different categories.

Despite Media Mobsters' admirable attempt at merging RPG character building and action combat with real-time strategy, Gangland will find its home with fans of the latter, where it provides loads of resource and territory management inside the network of mafia violence and politics. **Mike Griffin C+**

Developer: Media Mobsters
Publisher: Whiptail Interactive
Available: February

"Gangland looks great on paper, but it doesn't quite deliver all aspects of its proposed genre-blending with equal fervor."

Just another day on the job
in the Sicilian Mafia.



Sonic Advance 3

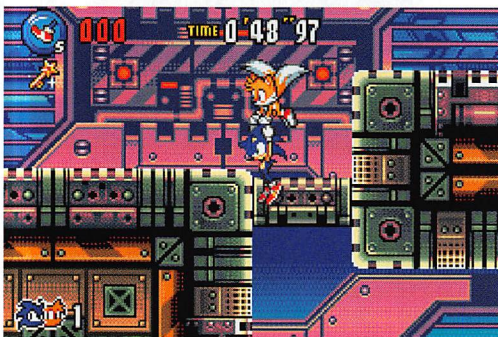
Teaching an old hedgehog new tricks

Sonic's nemesis, bad egg Dr. Eggman, is up to no good again—he's used Chaos Control to break the world into seven parts and it's up to Sonic and friends to retrieve the Chaos Emeralds and return the world to normalcy. Bad news for the world's fastest hedgehog; good news for fans of gorgeous, high-speed 2D gameplay, especially considering the new features that fill Sonic's latest with exciting possibilities. Apparently taking a cue from Sonic Heroes, Sonic Advance 3 utilizes a new cooperative gameplay dynamic. Players can select from one of five heroes—Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, Amy and Cream—and then assign a second partner character for backup support. The partner will lend a hand in the action and augment the main character's abilities; select Tails as backup, for example, and he'll help out with his flight

abilities, providing extra jumping height that can permit access to new areas. Further enhancing this mechanic is a co-op link-up option that lets two players fight Dr. Eggman together (in addition to other multiplayer modes similar to those in previous Sonic Advance games). Another new feature is the replacement of the world map with an actual hub level from which all other levels branch off. Sonic's previous GBA games have all been great—from what we've seen so far, SA3 looks to continue the trend.

Chris Hoffman

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Sega
Publisher: THQ
Available: May



We're going to assume there's nothing dirty happening in this screenshot.



Disney's Magical Quest 3

Preview

Another lost Capcom classic is making its way stateside thanks to the GBA: Disney's Magical Quest 3. Released for the Super Famicom in Japan during the waning days of 16-bit, Magical Quest 3 promises to again combine Disney magic with excellent graphics and solid platforming action. As in the previous Magical Quest games, MQ3's gameplay hinges on various costumes that are acquired through the course of the game and can be switched on the fly, giving playable characters Mickey and Donald access to new abilities. This time, the outfits let the heroes take the form of knight, magician or mountaineer as they explore the game's six stages, which include a city and the vast ocean. Two-player co-op play and versus modes are also featured. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom

Publisher: Capcom
Available: Fall



A Sound Of Thunder

Review

Another flaccid license, another mediocre Game Boy Advance game. Though far from bad, A Sound Of Thunder just seems to be going through the motions to deliver an isometric adventure game filled with fetch quests amidst bland levels and typical block-pushing puzzles. The graphics get the job done, but they're nothing special, while music was ignored and the controls are a bit slippery. Even the game's action component—blasting away dinosaurs with a small assortment of various weapons—isn't particularly exciting thanks to a somewhat odd targeting system and an under-abundance of ammo. Driving stages and multiplayer battles offer a little more variety, but not any more polish. A game about killer dinosaurs should have more thrills than this. **Chris Hoffman C**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Möbius Entertainment

Publisher: BAM!
Available: March



EA Sports Fight Night 2004

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: EA Canada

Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: March

Oftentimes in game development, stepping back is just as important as moving forward. If you find that what you've been working with isn't quite doing it for you, going back to square one is generally a good way to go. That's what the EA Sports did with Fight Night 2004 and the end result is poetry in motion. With their esteemed Knockout Kings franchise losing steam and popularity, EA returns with a vengeance with an all-new control scheme and a physics engine that is truly revolutionary. Surprising? Not really. EA Sports has once again created a standard by which every future boxing game will have to measure up to.

The heart and soul of Fight Night 2004 is the Career Mode. After creating a carbon copy of yourself (utilizing the same construction tools as Tiger Woods Game Face), players will work through the rankings on their way to becoming world champion. As players progress through their career, sponsorships will start calling, outfits will start to become unlocked—even ring girls will start calling your name. What's brilliant about Fight Night is that you'll be able to see your boxer mature over time. Through the use of mini-games, players will train their boxer and improve their stats. Covering all the bases—agility, strength, stamina, speed, etc.—the more you fight, the better you'll become. Although more training exercises would've been nice (the game only has a handful), what you get just manages to get the job done. Enhancing your career, players will be able to choose ring entrance music, their entourage and even pyrotechnic effects—this is the world of boxing, baby, and it's all over the top.

But the true star of the game is the Total Punch Control. Never before has a boxing game given so much control to the player. The problem with previous boxing games, where the control usually consisted of "pushing a button and a punch happens," is that the player never really had control of their fists. There was no skill involved to winning a fight—usually the button mashers would win

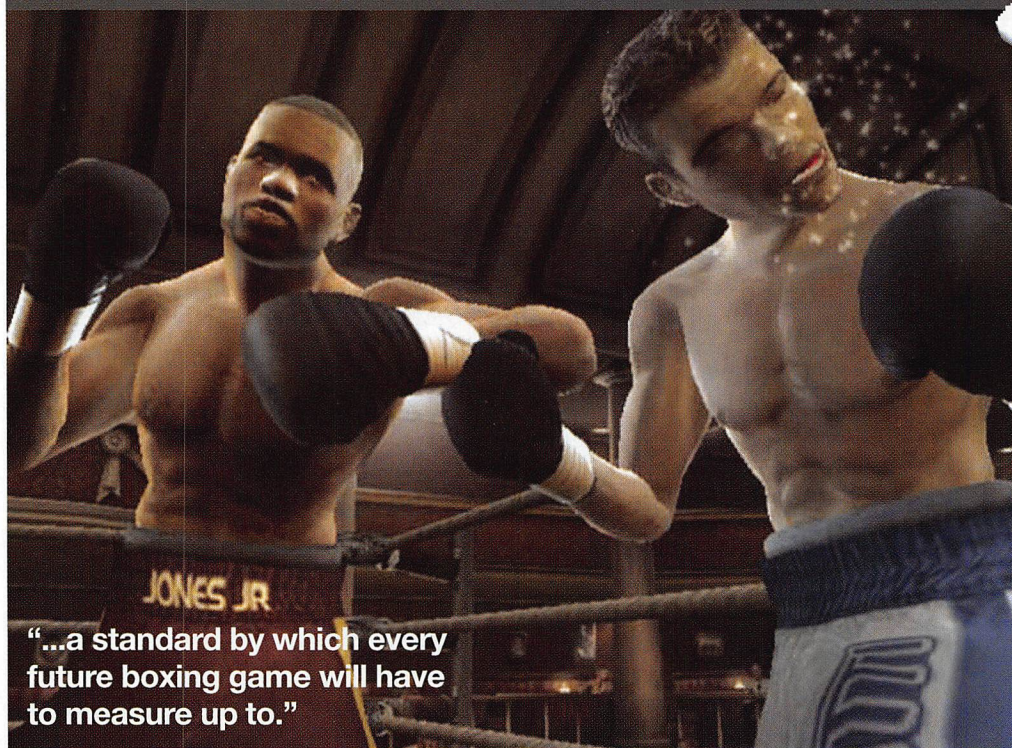
hands down. In Fight Night, the face buttons are done away with. Everything is handled by the analog sticks. No more pushing a button and seeing what it does, you're actually controlling your fists. So when you're executing a motion with the analog stick, you can see the punch happening on screen. In addition to having all of the basic punches, including jabs, uppercuts and hooks, Fight Night 2004 also has signature punches and illegal punches as well.

Another key component is the physics engine. A big complaint of previous boxing games (Knockout Kings included) was that they all used pre-scripted knockdown sequences. So if you played the game long enough, you would see the same animations over and over. That's not going to happen in Fight Night. There are literally hundreds, no scratch that, probably thousands of unique knockdown reactions in the game. The reason for this is that every knockdown is physics-based—dependant on what kind of punch, location, speed and strength of the boxer—multiple factors influence how the boxer falls down.

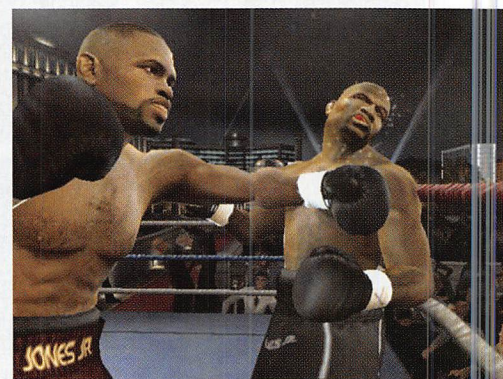
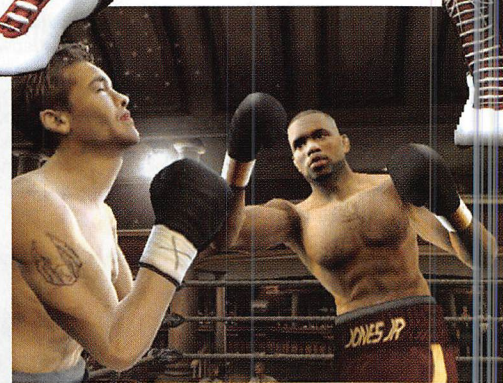
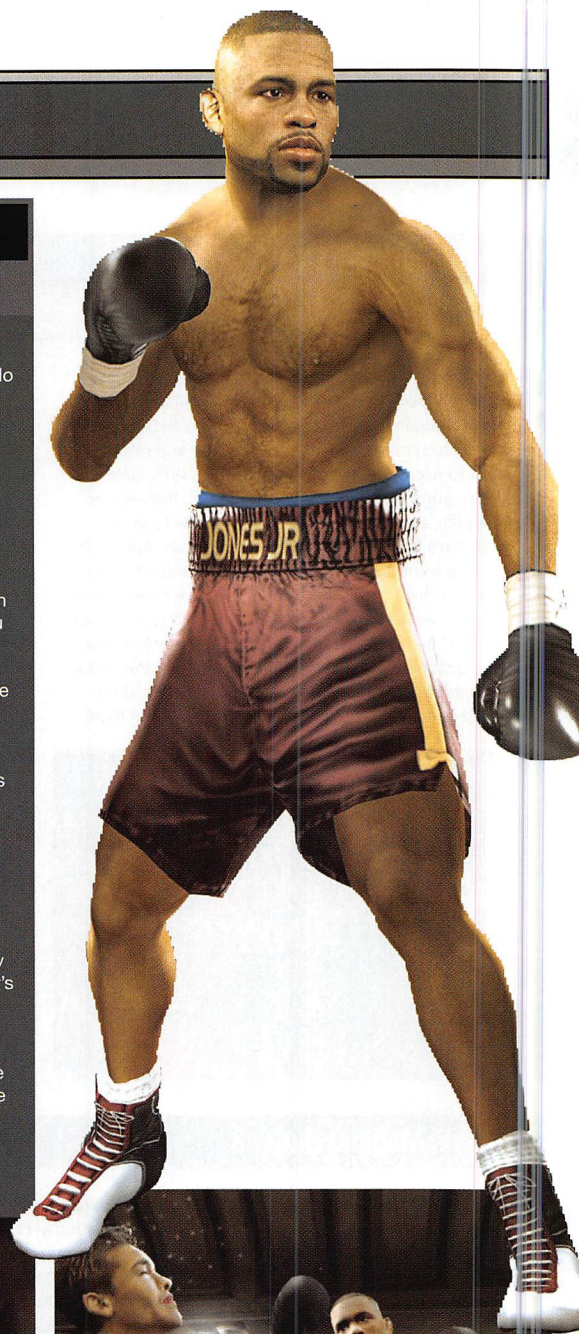
But what's truly astounding about Fight Night is the damage inflicted on the boxers. EA not only wanted you to feel like you're pounding the life out of your opponents, they wanted to show you the damage you were bringing. Using state-of-the-art facial mo-caps, players will see a boxer's face bruise, swell and get cut during fights. The damage isn't just for looks—it actually affects the gameplay as well. For example, if your boxer's right eye is swelled shut, he won't be able to react as quickly to punches coming at his face from the left.

And the boxing excitement isn't limited to your living room, either. On the PlayStation 2, players can go online via EA Sports Nation and pick fights with other wannabe champions across the country.

Let the pummeling begin. **Tom Ham** 



"...a standard by which every future boxing game will have to measure up to."



MLB 2005

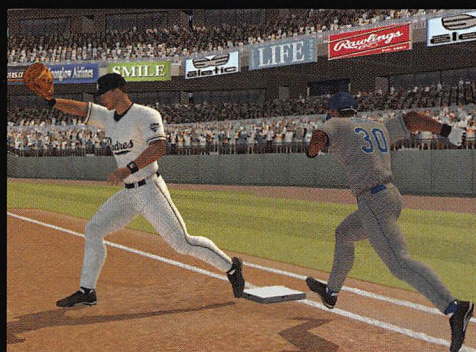
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: 989 Sports

Publisher: SCEA
Available: March

The MLB series has always had a wealth of playing options, and MLB 2005 is no exception. There are 11 gameplay modes, including MLB exclusives like Historical All-Time Greats and EyeToy functionality. MLB 2005 also has an incredibly deep career mode. Here, players will be able to create a player, start off in the minors and then work their way up to the pros. With the use of the EyeToy, players are able to take their picture and import their face to Create-A-Player—no other baseball game has this feature. Another key improvement is the overhauled Franchise Mode. Much

like Madden's Owner Mode, here players get to try their hands at ownership and all of the headaches that go along with it—player deals, television contracts, vendor negotiations, ticket and concession prices. Although not as deep as EA's Dynasty Mode, it still manages to get the job done nicely. But what surprised me most of all while playing MLB 2005 was how beautiful the game looked. Animations are silky smooth and the over 3,500 personalized animations put the realism over the top.

Tom Ham B+

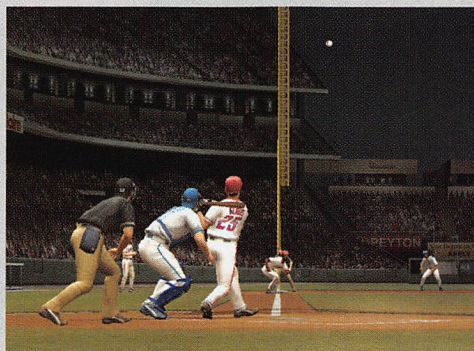


All-Star Baseball 2005

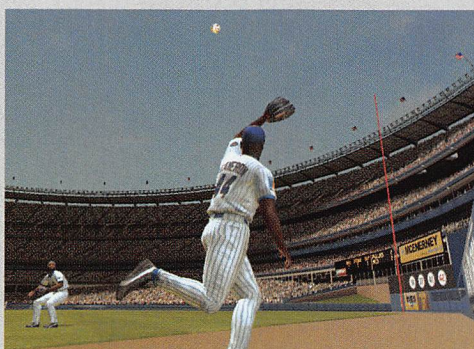
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Acclaim Austin

Publisher: Acclaim
Available: March

Acclaim's famed series is back and better than ever. The most innovative new feature is the Fielder Cam; instead of the traditional fielding view (where you're looking straight out into the field), once the ball is hit, the view immediately shifts to a third-person perspective (behind the fielder). Using icons on the field, players can navigate and figure out where to stand to catch the ball. You can even use the right analog to free-look around the field. Franchise mode is by far the deepest of any baseball game out there—including MVP. Players can either take over an existing franchise or start a new team from the ground up, then take part in Expansion Drafts, maintain budgets, trade players and even participate in Spring Training. The best feature of All-Star Baseball 2005 is the TWIB (This Week In Baseball) Challenge. Not only does the game allow players to relive some of the best moments of 2003, but it lets you change history. With 21 challenges, I can't say enough how cool this feature is. Online play? You betcha. After claiming last year their game was online (and then not having it at all), Acclaim has finally delivered. Tom Ham A-



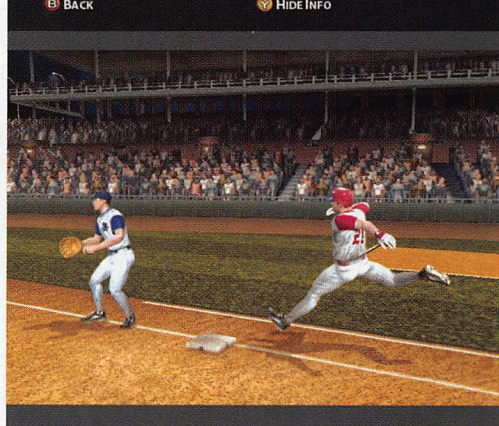
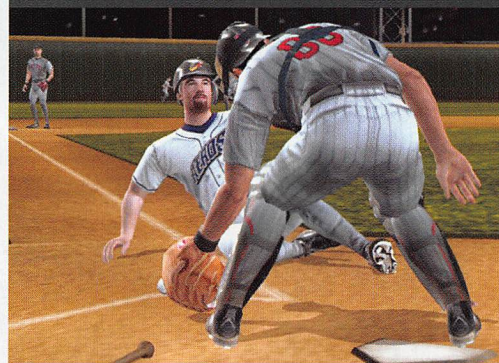
"Franchise mode is by far the deepest of any baseball game out there—including MVP."



MVP Baseball 2004

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: March

With a revamped Dynasty mode, a new batting system and my favorite feature, Big Play Control, MVP Baseball 2004 is the complete package. New for 2004 is the Pure Swing System. Here, players must use a combination of the left analog stick (to aim your hit) and perfect timing on the face buttons. When timed perfectly, players are essentially controlling where and when the ball comes in contact with the bat. Another key feature is Big Play Control. Utilizing the right analog stick, players are now able to make big plays. What's brilliant is how intuitive it is. Just lean the stick in the direction of the play and the game will execute the big play. Diving catches, climbing the wall, double-play breakups and even purposely running down the catcher at home plate—it's all possible with Big Play Control. Dynasty mode last year was pretty robust and this year, EA have taken it up a couple of notches. First off, players can now play in the Minors, from Class AA to Class AAA. Players are able to negotiate contracts, create goals and rewards and even control the action from a special Manager Mode. Tom Ham A



989 Sports'

Game Before the Game

at Super Bowl XXXVIII



Wow. What a game. Anyone who checked out Super Bowl XXXVIII this year will remember it as one of the most exciting games in Super Bowl history. But what made the real game so gut-wrenching was that the 989 Sports' Game Before The Game perfect record of 8-0 was on the line. After successfully predicting the outcome of the Super Bowl eight years in a row, it was all coming to a head during the final seconds of the big game.

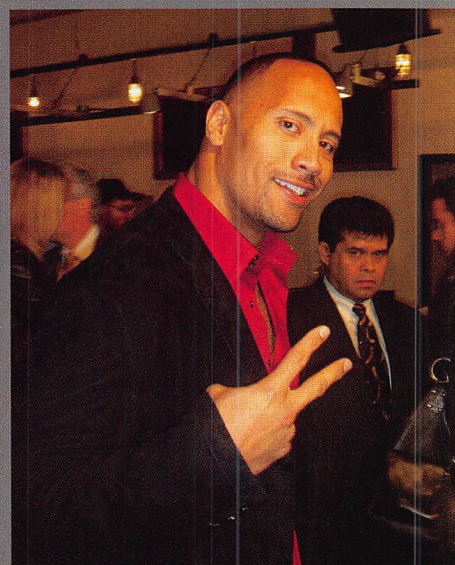
What is the Game Before the Game? Ever since 1996, Sony and 989 Sports have taken one player from the NFC and one player from the AFC team and pitted them against each other in a virtual Super Bowl preview. What's incredible is that ever since the Game Before the Game began, whoever has won it has gone ahead and won the Super Bowl as well. This year's match-up had Steve Smith from the Carolina Panthers and Troy Brown from the New England Patriots. Calling the action this year were Deion Sanders and Pat O'Brien from Access Hollywood.

Brown was favored to win (he won the Game Before

the Game two years ago for Super Bowl XXXVI), but was skillfully defeated by Smith, who brought on a swift attack of powerful running and precision passing. Although Brown scored first, Smith managed to shoot past him early on and maintain the lead till the very end. After it was all said and done, the Carolina Panthers beat the New England Patriots 29-21. "I play video games all the time," said Steve Smith, "especially sports games. I knew I was going to win this before we even started."

Unfortunately, everyone knows what the outcome of the game was. With just four seconds left, kicker Adam Vinatieri kicked a tie-breaking field goal, winning the game for New England and ending the consecutive prediction streak of 989 Sports' Game Before the Game.

989 Sports had a great ride while it lasted, but, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. **Tom Ham**



Rock-paper-scissors with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson at the Barbershop 2 party.



Paris Hilton and Tara Reid think naughty thoughts at the Playboy party (above). Assisting your naughty thoughts... (below).



Sell by date: infinity

FEEL



Three Dirty Dwarves

...and a shotgun, bowling ball and baseball bat

System: Sega Saturn
Developer: Appaloosa

Publisher: Sega
Available: 1997

Of all the gaming systems gone by, the Sega Saturn and Sega CD are really the only two I tend to fire up on a regular basis. For me, early 3D is best left as a pleasant memory, and 2D will forever entertain. Up on the list is the still wildly fun *Three Dirty Dwarves*. Released in a time when visually rich 2D games were wonderfully prevalent and filled with eccentric fantasy, the game sparkled with its unusually distinct setting of cartoon

inner-city grit and junkyard humor. From the playful animations to the colorful cast of enemies to the imaginative scenarios, three *Dirty Dwarves* was, and is, a visual treat.

So you pretty much plowed methodically forward on a wide plane with not a lot of complicated design to the levels, but that's absolutely OK when you're given so many creative moments—enemies besieged you with all sorts of objects and attacked from all directions onscreen. The real fun began in the multiplayer mode, where the help of two friends was paramount in a game that would not forgive the novice. The coolest thing was the need to resurrect a fallen ally with an attack before the aggressive enemies mauled the rest of the team—a smart way of building in additional intensity. Yes, the game was a little sluggish and cumbersome, but no matter. Grabbing a dwarf armed with a bat, shotgun or the outrageous power of a bowling ball and kicking some ass—only in the one-of-a-kind *Three Dirty Dwarves*. **BF**



Sin & Punishment

The only sin is missing this game

System: Nintendo 64 (Japan)
Developer: Treasure

Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2000

Playing through *Sin & Punishment* is a humbling experience. Not only because it forces you to re-acclimate yourself with the wondrous N64 pad (the auto run, button cluster move, Z-button shoot, analog aim and shoulder jump was a killer scheme to master), but for the way it makes you multitask—dodging, shooting, jumping and aiming all at the same time, with little room for error. Of course, it doesn't help that you're being bombarded with a visual cornucopia of exquisite artistry, extraordinary color schemes and mind-blowing effects well beyond the system's 3D limitations in a way that's almost impossible to put your finger on. Treasure's 3D style for *Sin & Punishment* is much like that of a fashion designer's rough sketch, where composition and silhouette are everything and polish a non-issue. *Sin & Punishment*

is polygonal reckless abandon as seen through the eyes of a master artisan and, as a result, one of the most alluring 3D N64 games ever devised. Only Treasure could pull off such a look and attach it to a mind-melting sci-fi action game immune to the effects of time; it's simply a wonder to see and play, no matter how many times you face it. *Sin & Punishment* never came out in the U.S., hitting Japan at the tail-end of the 64's U.S. reign, so it's only attainable as an import, making it one of the last great collectible cartridge games. Whether you collect or just feel like experiencing the pure joy of a great era gone by, *Sin & Punishment* is worth every ounce of effort you'll expend getting into it. **Dave Halverson**



Just you and the Crab Seeker...
14 more hit points to go.

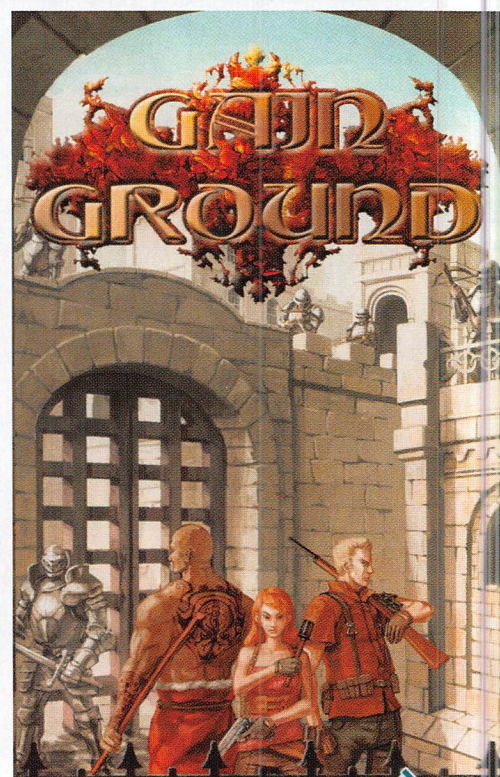
Sega Ages Vol. 9: Gain Ground

Gain Ground only gets better with age

I can't believe that after all this time and the hundreds of games I've played since, I still cannot put down Sega's Gain Ground. Gain Ground's simple give-and-take exchanges—building and selecting an army of warriors, from cyberpunks to medieval warriors, and then carefully selecting the appropriate one for the ranged attacks in league with each fortress—held me captive over a decade ago as much with the art (tiny little animated characters with awesome picture windows were a marvel back then) as the gameplay, and, somehow, the same holds true today, proving once and for all that 16-bit memories never die. Released in Japanese arcades in '88 and then on the Genesis in '91, the original was strictly a top-down affair, but in a rare successful update, Sega Ages has redeemed themselves, re-creating the charm in 3D (the characters are still waddling SDs) while affording three views: isometric, top down and in between. They've also remixed the music perfectly, conjuring up those old Genesis feelings once again. Great stuff; hope it keeps up. I love the Japanese game market. We suck ass in comparison. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: 3D Ages
Publisher: Sega
Available: February (Japan)

Slowly and methodically chipping away had
 its day, not so long ago...



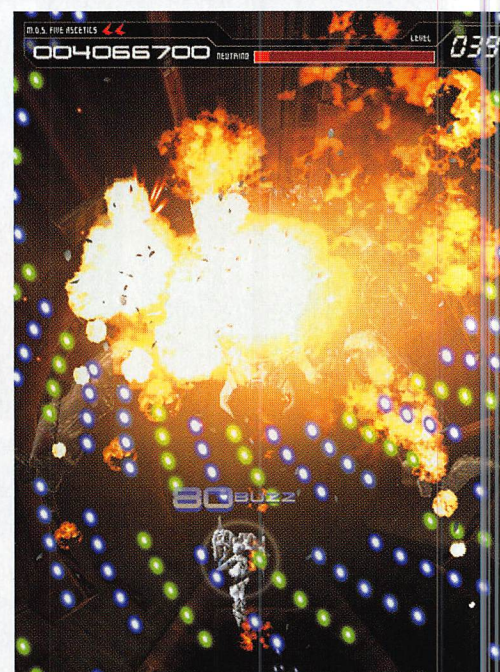
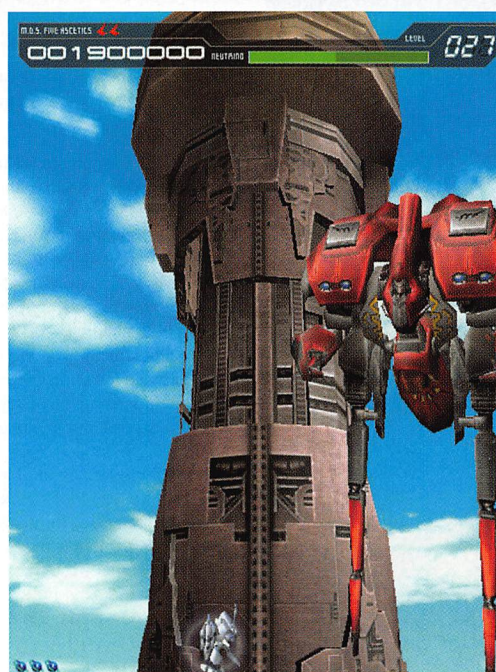
Psyvariar 2

Japan rules

The last thing I expected was a new Dreamcast game, but in the land where they don't change consoles like underwear, the Dreamcast is still plugged into enough wall sockets for über-talented shooter maker Success (Panorama Cotton) to release their answer to Treasure's Ikaruga—Psyvariar 2, hot from Japanese arcades—on the Dreamcast. The hook in Psyvariar 2, a top-down 3D shooter starring two Medium Drive Suits (you can choose a male or female pilot), is called the "buzz system" where scores of scrapes and near misses give you buzz bonuses and create buzz chains for a sick amount of points, ramping up your mech's firepower to defend against the thousands of unavoidable shots that fill the screen during boss battles. One of the other cool tricks is the ability to launch special attacks by twirling your MDS using the analog or D-pad. The game looks amazing, with key guardians scaling in from all directions like a 3D Darius, careening down shafts and exploding with amazing effects and screen-filling firepower—and the music is simply perfection. The DC lives! Time to dust it off yet again.

Dave Halverson

System: Dreamcast
Developer: Success
Publisher: Success
Available: February (Japan)



play anime



Kino's Journey

Places to go, people to flee

Kino's *Journey* is extraordinary anime, an obscure adventure starring a melancholy youth and a talking motorcycle as they make their way through a morose world of walled-in separatist countries, never staying in one place for more than three days. Episodes 1-4 work their way up to the duo's origins, and getting there is a mesmerizing ride. All we know until that first epiphany is that Kino is an introspective, meticulous, free-spirited wolf in sheep's clothing—diminutive in stature with a serious penchant for knives and gunplay—that speaks to a motorcycle. Their first stop (by way of oddly evolving terrain) delivers them to a Victorian city run completely by peculiar robots—its human citizenry sequestered to their individual homes—followed by the volume's strongest episode, "A tale of feeding off others," which concludes with a jarring twist. From there, cohesiveness actually begins to emerge, leading up to some startling revelations. The coolest (if not somewhat bizarre) thing about *Kino's Journey* is how it locks you onto its beacon almost at will, sucks you in to its peculiar state of mind, and then keeps you zoned in as the circumstances evolve in a way you'd never imagine. Is it all some strange metaphor, or just one man's peculiar vision of being free? "Drift along for the ride" indeed. The attention to detail and art style is quite wonderful and the use of color, like the story, often dreamy.

Dave Halverson **B+**

Studio: ADV Films

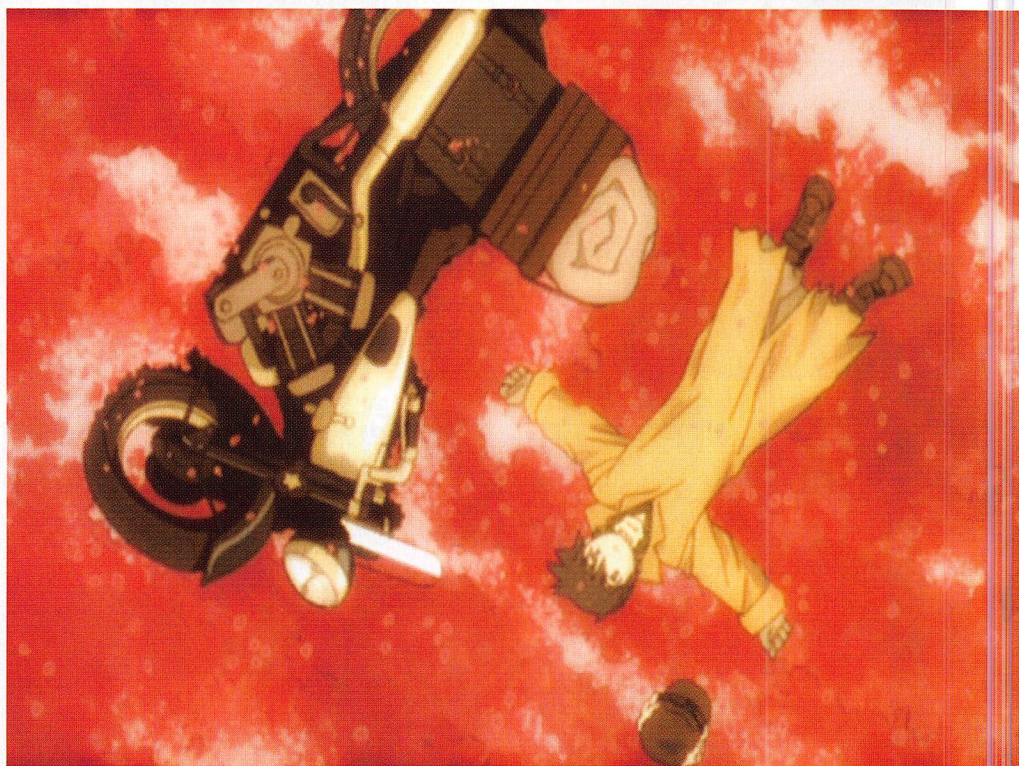
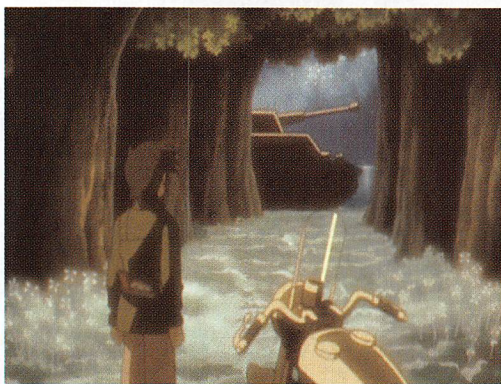
Rating: 15 & Up

Running Time: 100 Minutes

Available: 1

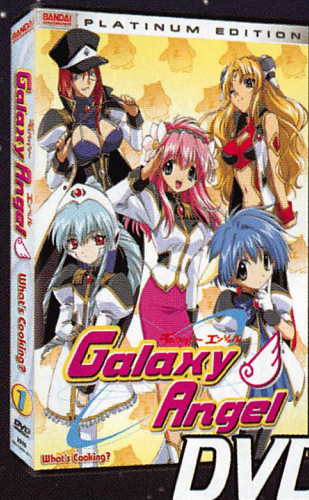


"Is it all some strange metaphor, or just one man's peculiar vision of being free?"



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TEXHNOLYZE

Subterranean nightmare

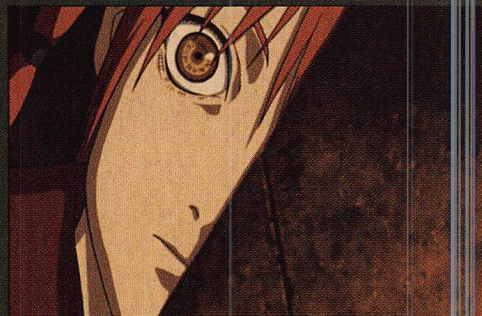
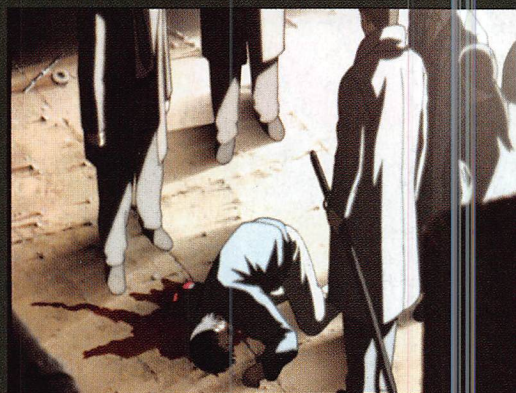
The latest sensation from Geneon, *Texhnolyze*, isn't dark—it's pitch black. Pitch can't-see-your-hand-an-inch-in-front-of-your-face black. In a brutal subterranean city called Lukuss, located far beneath the planet's surface, punishment comes by way of severing limbs, after which those lucky and affluent enough get Texhnolyzed—fitted with powerful cybernetics that join to the body through a nano-carbon intermediary—and those who aren't either bleed to death or learn to hobble and crawl through life...if they choose to "live" at all. There are two types of people in Lukuss: the lifeless, who live still lives, and those who choose to move about under the rule of the gangs that command every section of the city.

These first slowly evolving and branching episodes touch on the integral characters: Ran, a young girl who can see the immediate future (which I'm imminently foggy on at this point); Onishi, a gang leader struggling to stay viable and alive; Yoshii, a mysterious traveler from the surface world; and protagonist Ichise, a prize fighter (considered lower than dogs) who pays the ultimate price for mistreating a Texhnolyzed hooker after she tries to run her nail through

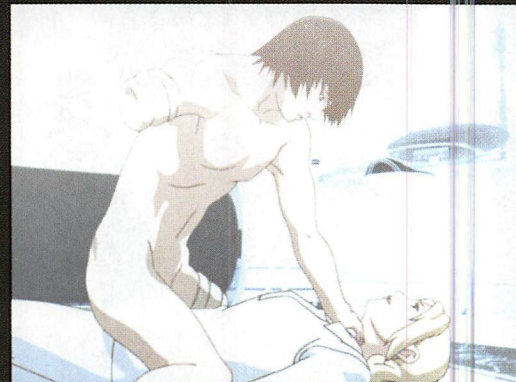
his eye. Watching as he is relieved of his arm and leg was genuinely agonizing—moving animation to be sure—almost as bad as watching him drag his bloody torso back into the city with his severed appendages tied together, dragging behind him in a snail trail of blood.

Vindication and just a bit of clarity soon follow as the series inches closer to its core elements, but it's a tough 100 minutes for sure—worth enduring for the promising thriller yet to evolve...at least according to the director (*Texhnolyze* is that rare anime with actual tangible extras). From the creators and producers of *serial experiments lain*, *Haibane Renmei* and *Hellsing*, wherever *Texhnolyze* is going, I'm confident it's going to be great in some way, shape or form...maybe not pretty, but great. Now I'm going to go be sick. **Dave Halverson B+**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 16 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1



"Watching as he is relieved of his arm and leg was genuinely agonizing...almost as bad as watching him drag his bloody torso back into the city..."



Pre-op, *Texhnolyze* style.

THERE'S NOTHING THIS MOUSE CAN'T SNATCH.

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MOUSE

① STEALING TEMPTATION

Yamanoue Gakuen (Setagaya, Tokyo) is a mammoth school with 3000 students, including elementary, secondary and university education. SORATA MUON, twenty-two years old, is a student. He is a reserved and could even be unreliable, but it seems these characters are more popular among them, though it may mean they show disrespect. Sorata is a mouse boy, a different reading of his name. But he is not a thief, MOUSE!! His theft is magnificent and splendid. He is assisted by three beautiful attendants: YAYOI KURIBAYASHI, HAZUKI KAKIO, and MEI MOMOZONO. Sorata uses his techniques, he steals anything he targets, such as the security system, the whole museum to get antique collection. Sorata is fumbled about with the enormous criminal syndicate, connected with the world, Sacred Security Secret Society, known as "4S". "Impossible is a word not to be found in his dictionary—nothing cannot be stolen by MOUSE."

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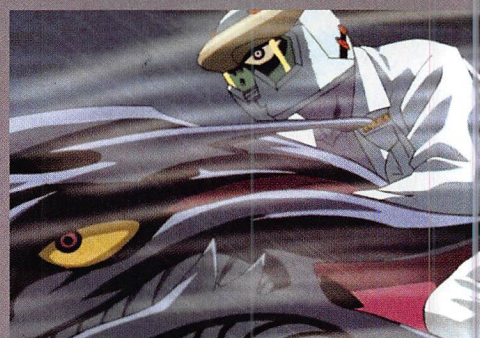
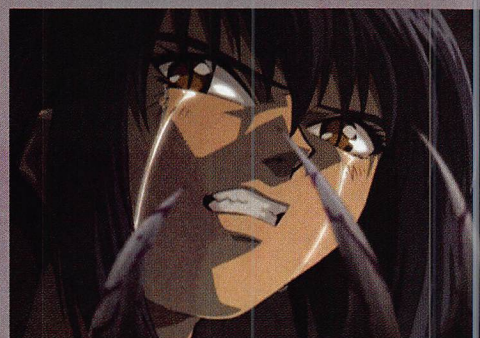
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Sadamitsu The Destroyer

Alien love triangle!



Alien invaders—intergalactic criminals banished into deep space—are arriving on Earth with frightening regularity; the ones that don't burn up in the atmosphere or make a deal with the government to live among us left for a robotic police officer to "recover" and send back into space to become stars as atonement for their sins...sins like eating Earth women—their favorite food. Enter the Corpse Gang, lead by the brash, bold Sadamitsu. When one of their one-sided rumbles is interrupted by a recovery, Sadamitsu, in a moment of misguided clarity, comes to the aid of a near-dead invader (a bloodthirsty bug-like creature) and gets the officer pretty much killed, leaving only his helmet intact, which, when fused with Sadamitsu's thick skull, turns him into a lean, mean, alien-hunting machine. Guess who's just become Earth's last hope? The robot cop's personality still intact, the relationship between Sadamitsu and "Junk" becomes the catalyst for the tirade of side stories and hi-jinks that ensue as the pair attempt to come to terms with each other and the ever-growing alien menace around them... and the back-up Junk sent for, which isn't exactly what he had in mind.

What begins as a bit of a spoof gradually evolves into a quirky, entertaining *Men in Black*-like scenario interjected

with just the right amount of humility as Sadamitsu comes to realize that aliens come in all shapes and sizes, from the new hot chick at school (big storyline there) to Coolon, the alien motorcycle: a sort of alien armadillo who talks like a surfer-dude. As cool and unique as Volume 1 was, in Volume 2, things really get raging as storylines intersect and conspiracies run rampant, leading up to a surprising turn of events when the real alien threat rears its ugly head(s). *Sadamitsu the Destroyer* is a great-looking show with a cool edge and a look and feel all its own—an amalgam of so many things that it ends up decidedly unique.

Dave Halverson

Studio: Anime Works

Rating: 13 & Up

Running Time: 100 Minutes

Available: Two

If I was part alien super hero, I'd want a bike just like Coolon!



"Sadamitsu the Destroyer is a great-looking show with a cool edge and a look and feel all its own..."

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Slayers Gorgeous

Knockers, knockers... Who's there? Naga!

The second in ADV's fun-with-adjectives *Slayers* trio (following *Great* and preceding *Excellent*), *Slayers Gorgeous* finds Lina and Naga doing what they do best—pigging out and arguing—when their bliss is suddenly broken by a dragon armada lead, oddly enough, by a teenage girl. Upon further investigation, it turns out the girl is actually the daughter of the king, Lord Culvert. When she was denied an increase in her allowance, she stole away with the kingdom's dragon army, erected her own kingdom and now invades daily at high noon in an effort to break him down. Strange circumstances are made all the stranger when Lina joins the king and Naga the princess. Then comes the twist, and things really get weird (although by *Slayers* OVA standards, it's nothing new). *Slayers* has always been a circus of the absurd—from the tall tales to how Naga stands upright with mammoth beach ball-like boobs protruding from her tiny frame—but it always brings the fun.

Animation-wise, many a scene from *Gorgeous* is just that, and the hour overall flies by. Between the dysfunctional royal banter, dragon lore and Lina and Naga's usual spaz attacks, there's never a dull moment. **Dave Halverson B**

Studio: ADV Films

Rating: 15 & Up

Running Time: 60 Minutes



"Slayers has always been a circus of the absurd...but it always brings the fun."

A rare moment where Lina appears surprised. Must be ready to light someone up.



Ghost in the Shell

Stand Alone Complex

June 2004

SUMMER 2004



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10TH ANNIVERSARY

Dead Leaves

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PRODUCTION I.G

Happy Lesson

Five on one...no fair!?

Chitose's parents died when he was just a little kid, leaving him a nice, big house to move into once he was old enough to leave the orphanage, which he finally is. Much to his mortification, however, five of his teachers have decided to move in too, and become his new mommies. There's Mutsuki, the sweet, innocent homeroom/Japanese teacher; Kisaragi, the slightly off-kilter chemistry teacher; Yayoi, the Shinto priestess/über-hot school nurse; Satsuki, the physical education tyrant; and Uzuki, the super-sweet bubbly art teacher who looks and acts about 15. School is now in session and wearing very little.

On the one hand, they're all hot, so happy days, but on the other, they're all his teachers, so...hmm. Talk about a quandary: what's a semi-prude teenage boy to do? Sneak peeks and think dirty thoughts, that's what! But this is anime, where young boys think of everything but "doing it." Still, these are all young, kooky, somewhat neurotic teachers starring in a 15-and-up anime, so who knows? Stranger things (much stranger) have

happened. For now, Chitose is more hung up on keeping his anxious-to-please roommates a secret, especially from the class president, the other girl in his life—or so she wishes. He's also a target for real-estate shysters and anyone else who might benefit from exposing his situation, so he's got a lot on his mind for a high school student.

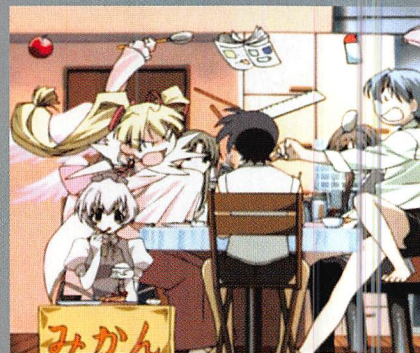
There's a lot to like about *Happy Lesson*, which so far is surprisingly tame given its premise (and where the Japanese usually take these situations), although I'm almost creeped out by the character designs. The girls' eyes aren't just big—they're like cathedral windows. Hopefully we'll see less of their faces and more of their places in episodes to come. **Dave Halverson B-**

Studio: ADV Films

Rating: 15 & Up

Running Time: 125 Minutes

Volume: 1



"...what's a semi-prude teenage boy to do? Sneak peeks and think dirty thoughts, that's what!"

BE A STRANGER TO FEAR



BAST OF SYNDROME

The city of Xenon, 2097: The ultimate cyber game has been created, letting players battle as robots. But somehow, the game's virtual space and the real world are linked, and damages occurring to the city during the game are reflected in real life.

A piercing scream, a little girl's ghostly face and the powerful scent of lemons: All three may be clues to unraveling the enigma. To solve this mystery, a "Dream Team" of the top three young gamers in Xenon must overcome their rebellious attitudes and fears to enter the very game itself.



THE GAME BEGINS IN MAY

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ADV1084 BAST OF SYNDROME © KBS, DONGWOO 2001

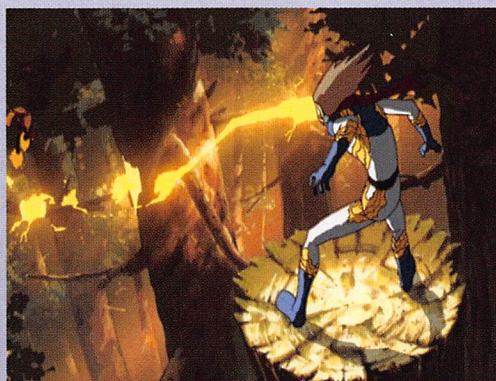
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Cyborg 009

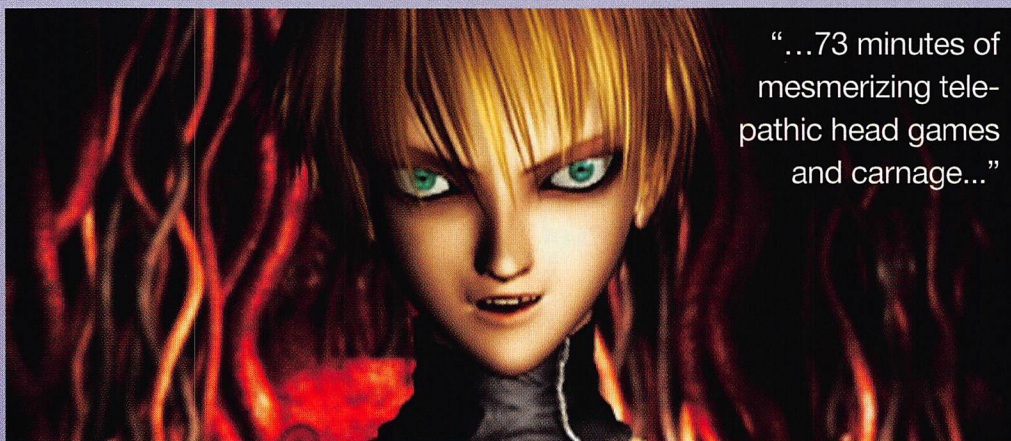
Weapons of mass rebellion

Back in the late '60s, when there was little to no anime happening in the U.S., one of the early pioneers of flamboyant character design, Naoyuki Konno, took the spirit of shows like *Gigantor* and *Speed Racer* and cranked things up a few notches with his amazing designs for *Cyborg 009*. He did such an amazing job, in fact, that all these years later, remastered, re-scored and unedited, it's more than withstood the test of time; great animation is indeed a timeless commodity. The story follows a cybernetically altered boy, plucked from society for a crime he didn't commit, unknowingly turned into a weapon of mass destruction, then sprung by the eight models that preceded him (cyborgs 001 through 008) to rise up against the hierarchy (Black Ghost) that created them and stole their identities. The Japanese answer to comics like *X-Men*, each cyborg has a peculiar personality to go with his or her special powers, from shape shifting to flight to a telepathic super-infant. Also like *X-Men*, *Cyborg 009* is as much about the personal struggle of being different and alone as it is fast-paced action and adventure, and it does both exceedingly well with an innocence that's long since slipped from our grasp. Columbia TriStar have done an amazing job bringing the initial eight episodes up to current DVD and audio standards for this two-disc set. If I didn't know better, I'd swear it wasn't over a few years new. An essential purchase. **Dave Halverson A-**

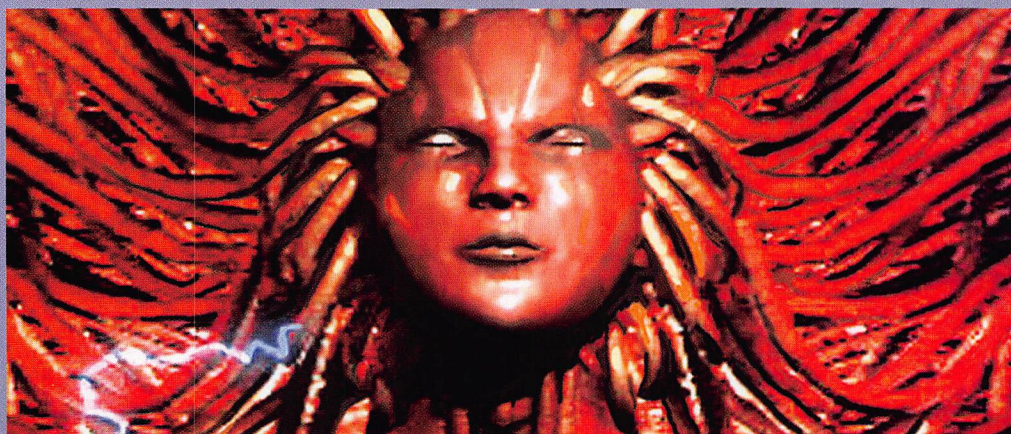
Studio Columbia TriStar
Rating N/A
Running Time 198 Minutes



"If I didn't know better, I'd swear it wasn't over a few years new."



"...73 minutes of mesmerizing telepathic head games and carnage..."



Galerians: Rion

Genocidal maniacs

Until now, *Galerians* was reserved for gamers—a dark, deeply disturbing video game franchise (especially popular in Japan) for the PS One and 2 about a genocidal super computer named Dorothy, bent on enslaving the human race, and her young human-like offspring called Galerians. *Rion* takes place six years before the last game (*Galerians: Ash*) as Dorothy's disciples set out to fight on the front lines of virus protection by finding and killing a girl named Lilia...but they'll have to get through Rion first. Six years prior, after losing control over his cellular super computer, Rion's father and his partner Dr. Pascale implanted the virus programs that could destroy Dorothy into their children's brains (Rion and Lilia respectively) as a safeguard, making them the only scrap of humanity standing between Dorothy and the survival of the human race. With the parents long dead, that time has come, and it makes for one very cool game-derivative DVD...73 minutes of mesmerizing telepathic head games and carnage sans complex patterns and those pesky control pads—like one long, extremely cool game cinema. While *Rion* doesn't have the sophistication of a Square or Pixar production, what it does have is fiercely cool character designs and environments, truly haunting scenarios and an overdose of cyberpunk thrills with a decidedly wicked, dark, metallic edge. Besides the addition of multiple language audio and subtitles, Image have also added an alternate English soundtrack along with a dubbed version of the original. Psychic friends indeed! **Dave Halverson B**

Studio Image Entertainment
Rating 13 & Up
Running Time 73 Minutes

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

- 01 **Ninja Scroll TV vol. 2** *urban vision*
- 02 **Princess Mononoke** *miramax*
- 03 **N.G. Evangelion: Resurrection** *adv films*
- 04 **Blood: The Last Vampire** *manga entertainment*
- 05 **Initial D Battle 3: Night Kids** *tokyopop*
- 06 **Mama Mia!** *anime 18*
- 07 **Millennium Actress** *dreamworks*
- 08 **Dragon Ball Z: Broly** *funimation productions*
- 09 **Ninja Scroll: 10th Anniv. Spec Ed** *manga ent.*
- 10 **Wrath of the Ninja** *central park media*



Play Magazine Top Ten

- 01 **Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi** *adv films*
- 02 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 03 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*
- 04 **Haibane Renmei** *geneon entertainment*
- 05 **Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
- 06 **Space Pirate Captain Herlock TLR** *geneon ent.*
- 07 **Comic Party** *right stuff international inc.*
- 08 **Heat Guy J** *geneon entertainment*
- 09 **Sadamitsu The Destroyer** *anime works*
- 10 **Initial D** *tokyopop*



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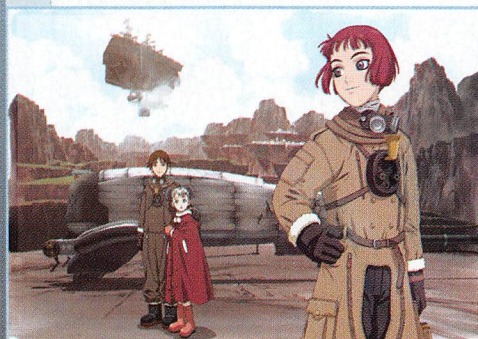
Dave Halverson

- 01 **Sadamitsu The Destroyer** *anime works*
- 02 **Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
- 03 **Heat Guy J** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Texhnolyze** *geneon entertainment*
- 05 **Galaxy Angel** *bandai entertainment*



Christina Alexander

- 01 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 02 **Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
- 03 **Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi** *adv films*
- 04 **Tokyo Godfathers** *columbia tri-star entertainment*
- 05 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*



Nelson Lui

- 01 **Comic Party** *right stuff international inc.*
- 02 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*
- 03 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Someday's Dreamers** *geneon entertainment*
- 05 **Galaxy Angel** *bandai entertainment*



Reader's Anime Top Five

- 01 **Ninja Scroll TV** *urban vision*
- 02 **N.G. Evangelion: Resurrection** *adv films*
- 03 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Initial D** *tokyopop*
- 05 **Heat Guy J** *geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

- 01 **Those Who Hunt Elves** *adv manga*
- 02 **Ai Yori Aoshi** *tokyopop manga*
- 03 **Demon City Shinjuku** *adv manga*
- 04 **Seven of Seven** *adv manga*
- 05 **@Large** *tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

- 01 **Last Exile OST: Dolce Triade** *geneon music*
- 02 **Neon Genesis Evangelion OST II** *geneon music*
- 03 **.hack//GAME MUSIC Best** *geneon music*
- 04 **Fruits Basket OST** *geneon music*
- 05 **Chobits Song Collection** *geneon music*

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Naked Weapon

Starring: Marit Thoresen, Almen Wong Pui-Ha, Daniel Wu
Director: Tony Ching Siu Tung
Released By: Hart Sharp
Rated: R

If Charlie was a sadistic madam who kidnapped young girls to train as assassins, *Naked Weapon* could be Charlie's Devils. But it's actually much worse than that. Madam M actually kidnaps 40 (count 'em, 40) 12- to 13-year-olds and weeds them down to three over the course of six years in a prison camp that makes *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence* look like a summer retreat. If you like your Hong Kong action nasty, look no further, although Tony Ching Siu Tung is no Cory Yuen. Some of the hyper-exaggerated wirework borders on hilarity (deflecting projectile picture-frame glass fast enough to pierce flesh and bone...balsa wood tables flying at speeds faster than the punch that propelled them) while some of the fights are absolute works of art. The man has a definite affection for the female form in combat; too bad he likes to kill them off nearly as much. *Naked Weapon* is a brutal action film wrapped around a tirade of American-inspired story clichés (it was actually filmed in English) with an emphasis on unjust human suffering and indignity. No *So Close* but it definitely has its moments.

Extras: Surprisingly good for an Asian film, with a very comprehensive look behind the (weird) scenes. **DH**
Movie: C+ **DVD:** B-



Dr. Seuss' The Cat in the Hat

Starring: Mike Meyers, Alec Baldwin, Kelly Preston
Director: Bo Welch
Released By: Universal
Rated: PG

How bad is this movie? I wish I could lie, but to tell you the truth, there's only one word to describe this film and it's "poop." Wearing a "Cat" getup that would barely pass in an SNL sketch, Mike Meyers channels the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz* and his Linda Richman character from "Coffee Tawk;" it's horrible. The sets—storybook suburbs and Ford Focuses bathed in putrid yellows and greens—look like Dick Tracy leftovers, and any Seuss charm/wisdom is painfully expunged for corny sex puns and idiotic pop-culture satire. Everyone in this movie sinks to a new low for being privy to it. Wait—I liked the fish.

Extras: Plenty; behind the scenes featurettes, Dance-Along With the Cat, feature audio commentary, deleted scenes, outtakes. Better than the movie, but that's not saying much. It's always fun to see how crap like this gets made though. **DH**

Movie: D- **DVD:** B



School of Rock

Starring: Jack Black
Director: Richard Linklater
Released By: Paramount
Rated: PG-13

Jack Black's mainstream rock pic may seem like a taffy-sweet, at times inspired, fable, but underneath all of those old-school riffs it's really just an Adam Sandler movie without the Sandler. Thing is, I like the sloppy, drug crazed and/or asshole indie Jack a lot better than the "oh, isn't he cute?" Jack from *School*. But I suppose every tenacious talent must have his day. Now can we please get past the "loser makes good, helps the kids and then gets the girl" scenario, please? What pushes this one over the top is all Jack (I know I'm supposed to say the kids, but I found their clichés and back-



The Office: The 1st & 2nd Series

Starring: Martin Freeman, Mackenzie Crook, Ricky Gervais
Director: Ricky Gervais, Stephen Merchant
Released By: Warner Bros.
Rated: NR

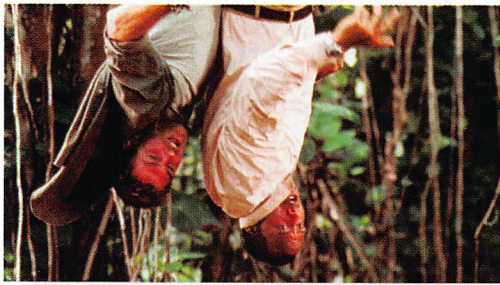
Perhaps you've never heard of the Golden Globe-winning BBC comedy *The Office*, which sadly recently ended after its second season. In the landfill of primetime television, this brilliant mockumentary about the numbing existence of office life at a nondescript English paper company immerses as a priceless work of art. Shot with an unassuming touch on video, the series follows the apathetic employees and their overbearing boss as they move through the grind of the daily corporate machine, finding humor in the most unlikely of ways. Looking into the camera with a sad sincerity, they explain their situations and duties, completely oblivious to the absurdity of it all. The leader of the doomed pack is David Brent, whose overreaching boss tendencies become caustic in his incessant attempts at humor. Amazingly, you want to like the poor guy as much as hate his destructive tendencies, watching him fight his incompetence with a painful need for acceptance. Played by Ricky Gervais with a caricature-like tick of deliberate animations, the David character is one of the finest performances I've seen in television. The surrounding cast more than pulls its own weight, investing the colorful but convincingly real characters with an emotion that does not exist in typical comedy. But *The Office* is anything but typical; rolling underneath the laughs is a range of despair, an uncomfortable reality we all face in the severity of our own everyday existence. It can be disarming at times, completely unexpected through the razor-sharp writing, yet it's what binds their emotions in our gut.

Extras: Topped off with outtakes, usual commentaries and deleted scenes; the video diary is a decent addition. **BF**
Series: A **DVD:** B

ground stories asinine) and the great writing by Mike White, who managed to Mickey-rig rock into the grade school curriculum so naturally it looked and smelled like the real thing. If only they'd have dropped the edgy Jack into a real music class of practical misfits where he could've cranked the Marshalls and really laid into the depths of metal, aside from the obvious Zeppelin, Hendrix, Metallica (etc.) references. Because, at the end of the day, they didn't rock so hard. If your parents like it, you know it sucks.

Extras: Are an understatement. Even MTV gets in on the act (can they smell a shameless promo a mile away or what?). It's all inside: commentaries from everyone including the kids (okay, all together now... "ahhhh"), two video diaries, Dewey Finn's history of rock, the video, interactive do-dads. You'll be sick of them all by the time it's over.

Dave Halverson
Movie: B- **DVD:** B+



The Rundown

Starring: Dwayne Johnson, S.W. Scott, Rosario Dawson, Chris Walken
Director: Peter Berg
Released By: Universal
Rated: PG-13

There's nothing new about Peter Berg's *Midnight-Run*-meets-*Indiana-Jones* action extravaganza (starring every cliché ever shot through a lens), but that's not what Dwayne

and Seann's fans are looking for. What *Rundown* lacks in originality, it aspires to make up for in the anti-chemistry between The Rock, in all his rock-ness, and Seann William Scott doing his best Jungle Stifler. The poor guy is obviously stuck in the typecasting nightmare from hell, but I'm sure his fans from *Pie*, *Dude* and *Evolution* are "way stoked." Christopher Walken phones in his tyrannical jungle overlord and it's still the best performance in the movie, playing the opposing force to The Rock's Beck, a one-man army-for-hire sent to bring Scott's Walker back to daddy dearest for a man-sized beating, so he can collect \$250 large to open a restaurant. In between, we get Rosario Dawson as a rebel playing off of the two (I wasn't feeling it) and the archeological treasure everyone is after: the Gato. You can guess the rest. No doubt The Rock is an action force to be reckoned with and the master of many fighting styles, but he has yet to meet the script that will launch him to Schwarzenegger status.

Extras: Way more information than you need or care to watch. They interview the damn monkey; seriously. Lord of The Rings didn't have this many extras. They obviously thought they had the next big thing. They don't. **DH**
Movie: C **DVD:** B

Dickie Roberts: Former Child Star

Starring: David Spade, Mary McCormack
Director: Sam Weisman
Released By: Paramount
Rated: PG-13

An overwhelmingly unfunny David Spade stars as Dickie Roberts, a former child star wanting to rekindle his bright light so badly that he resorts to renting a family for the month to bolster his image. What starts as a PR stunt ends in—surprise!—Dickie finding the true meaning of acceptance. Somebody toss me an air-sickness bag as I recall *Dickie Roberts: Former Child Star*'s nauseating attempts at mixing sentimentally and grade-school humor. The dead-on-arrival march of jokes are joined by the parade of cameo appearances from real child stars who are just aren't amusing in their self-mockery. Given the young audience this movie's laughs are dumbly geared for—I suppose a preteen will laugh at such gems as Dickie attempting a Slip 'N Slide without running water—the egregious school-spirit scene sexualizing a child should banish this one to the bottom of the aforementioned barf bag.

Extras: Deleted scenes and featurettes are yet again the obvious filler. Director and writer commentary not so bad given the material. Extended music video, Child Stars on Your Television. **Brady Fletcher**

Movie: D- **DVD:** C-



Step into Liquid

Starring: Rochelle Ballard, Shawn Barron, Layne Beachley
Director: Dana Brown
Released By: Artisan
Rated: PG

From the makers of *The Endless Summer* comes *Step Into Liquid*, an awe-inspiring, almost religious experience circling the globe in search of waves and people of all shapes and sizes. This refreshingly unpretentious surfing flick is a celebration of man's connection with Mother Nature and each other, which in this day and age seems almost foreign. This movie is good for your soul. From the freshwater waves of Sheboygan, Wis. to Jerry Lopez and Pipeline... father to son, guys to girls, Gidget to a guy who surfs paralyzed...it's just a wonder to behold. Surfer or not, *Step Into Liquid* may put a little more passion into whatever you do, and the soundtrack is as big and beautiful as the waves.

Extras: How about the entire version of Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer for PC and a complete version of the film in high definition for Microsoft Windows Media with 5.1 sound?

And that's only the beginning. **Dave Halverson**

Movie: B+ **DVD:** A



The Running Man

Starring: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Richard Dawson, Jesse Ventura
Director: Paul Michael Glaser
Released By: Artisan
Rated: R



I'm proud to live in a state where Ahnuld is the governor, although if Bill and Ted would have stepped out of their cosmic phone booth back in '89 and told me that Arnold and Jesse were governors in the future, I'd have said, "Sorry dudes; wrong number." Watching the future governors square off at the end of the movie is quite surreal. What's more spooky though is that *The Running Man* is set in LA 2017—a police state where people are tried in the press and tortured as "contestants" on live TV for cash and prizes. Er...we have John Ashcroft and Fear Factor (I'd rather run for my life than eat pig uterus), and trying people in the press (as well as making or breaking them) is common practice...and it's only 2004! Aye carumba! For the uninitiated, *The Running Man* is a must-see low-budget '80s sci-fi Schwarzenegger juggernaut where criminals are dropped into a game of cat-and-mouse with fabricated superheroes called Stalkers for a duel to the death...or their freedom. Subzero, Buzzsaw, Fireball, Captain Freedom (Ventura)...and who can ever forget Dynamo? Three-hundred pounds of horny human Lite Brite that shot electric bursts and sang opera! At one point, Arnold's Ben Richards exclaims, "I'm not into politics; I'm into survival!" If he only knew; 20 years later he's enjoying both.

Extras: Paul Glaser and producer Tim Zinnemann sound like they lost a bet (on top of not liking the film) in one of the most uninteresting director commentaries ever, while Rob Cohen (*The Fast and the Furious*, *xXx*) is utterly fascinating at every turn, as he meticulously lays out '80s moviemaking in all of its sleazy splendor. **Dave Halverson**

Movie: B **DVD:** C+

damien rice O

**Damien Rice**

O

MGM

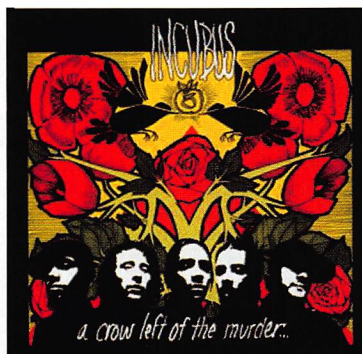
Dublin-born Damien Rice falls into the modern folk category, but slapping on a label is so unfortunate when it recalls all the wrong images of such an exceptional work. His acoustic guitar-driven sound is melancholy and full of heartfelt emotion, picking up energy at the perfect moments with the most unlikely of arrangements. Filling in his delicate songwriting with a tasteful touch of strings, background noise, chants and even a stretch of opera in the emotive closing track, "Eskimo," Rice has crafted an album of poignancy and supple warmth. His nurturing voice mixes perfectly in the decorative air of the tunes, even spelling out a little bitterness when called upon in the weightier "Cheers Darlin'." This isn't always the happiest of albums—Lisa Hannigan begins "I Remember" with a nice rumination on relationships before Rice jumps in with a thick retort flowing into the next track—but it is an album that must be appreciated.

**Azure Ray**

Hold on Love

Vector

If you fade away while listening to Azure Ray's sophomore effort, it won't be out of boredom. Slow and pensive could describe every track on the languid album, with a sound that recalls Mazy Star's sluggish delivery. Listen closely and you hear words of cheery angst that don't always match the tone of the music. Their observations of life familiar leave most the emotion to the work of the sounds, which drip like warm molasses. *Hold on Love* has its dry stretches, but it's still a pleasant ride worth taking.

**Incubus**

A Crow Left of the Murder

Sony

Upon first listen, *A Crow Left of the Murder* hits as a muddled, contrived rock. Same might be said on the hundredth listen, but by then you gain more of an appreciation for the aggressive melodies and urgent jamming in the better songs. The lead track, "Megalomaniac," starts the album out on a fine note, with a rousing opening crescendo that soon meets with a crash of lyrical activism that crackles along with the instrumentals. Lead singer Brandon Boyd has a preoccupation with the media and gluttonous pop culture, but his annoying strain as a rocker with a message keeps most of the songs on a tight leash. Incubus show flashes of huge talent and obviously revel in their ability to piece together tightly wound rhythms. Maybe next album they'll relax a bit and discover their way.

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Glen Phillips

Live at Largo

Returning to the days when songwriting mattered, every one of these acoustic-guitar-only songs paints a story

Missy Elliot

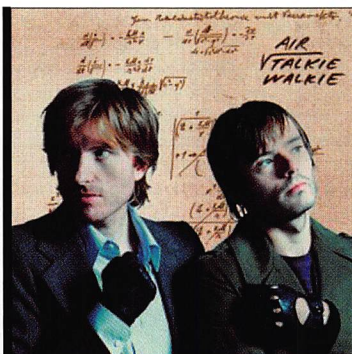
This is Not a Test

Don't care for rap? Don't matter when it's driven by wildly infectious beats

Phillip Glass

The Fog of War (soundtrack)

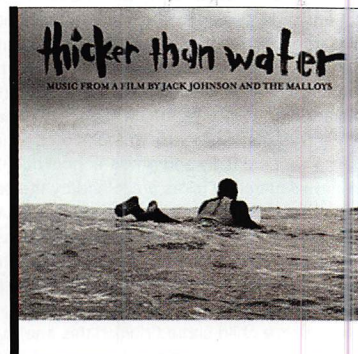
Glass' third collaboration with documentary filmmaker Errol Morris sounds as haunting and cautionary as the film itself

**Air**

Talkie Walkie

Virgin

Chill out, turn down the lights and close your eyes—whatever it takes to let the dreamy warmth of Talkie Walkie fully settle in. Contemplative and mood-driven, softly textured and progressively indulgent, Air's third album isn't a huge departure from their electronic-lounge formula, but a consistently growing maturity makes it all go down smoother than ever. From the lovely calm of "Cherry Blossom Girl" to the solemn charge of "Alone in Kyoto," Talkie Walkie is all atmosphere. Perhaps more substance will ride on the wings of style next time out.

**Thicker Than Water**

Music from the Film by Jack Johnson & The Malloys

Brushfire

You don't have to be entrenched in the culture to appreciate the mellow vibe in this eclectic collection of songs from the indie surf movie *Thicker Than Water*. Producer Jack Johnson dominates the set list with some of his better work, highlighted by a duet with G. Love on "Rainbow," one of the better, more evocative tracks on the album. Mixing spoken word, gentle acoustics, blues and Asian influences, *Thicker Than Water* is a consistently pleasing musical landscape that evokes a spirit and sparkling flow of the tranquil seas.

Portable AV player

RCA RD2780 LYRA Audio-Video Jukebox

www.rca.com

Price: \$449

So you're flying overseas, stuck in coach with a little kid kicking the back of your seat. What do you do? Throw on a pair of headphones and watch up to 80 hours of video on your wickedly cool LYRA audio and video jukebox. Sporting 20GB of storage space, the RD2780 is perfect for movie or audio buffs wanting to have all of their media in one convenient place. The RD2780 can handle everything from MPEG-4 and MPEG-1 to MP3s and WMAs. It's also upgradeable to MP3PRO. Measuring 5.31" X 3.15" X 1.06", the RD2780 weighs a mere 10.5 ounces. Screen resolution is 320 X 240. Other features include the ability to display JPEG images in a pocket photo album (over 100,000 photo images can be stored on it) and being able to record from a video source such as a camera or even TV. Pretty damn slick. **Tom Ham**



Ultimate PC audio

Creative GigaWorks S750 7.1 Speakers

www.creative.com

Price: \$499.99



Playing PC games will never be the same with these bad boys. Pushing 700 watts, Creative's latest 7.1 speaker system sets the new standard for PC audio performance. The addition of two extra surround speakers gives gamers that added level of depth to games that 5.1 and 6.1 speakers simply can't match. Sporting the prestigious THX Multimedia Certification Standard, the S750 not only offer superb sound and extended high frequency response during gameplay, but can also perform equally well with DVD-Audio and SACD recordings. To produce such incredible sounds, the GigaWorks satellites use a titanium "super tweeter" that handles high frequencies and a 4-inch cone driver that handles midrange frequencies. The S750s come with a powerful 210W subwoofer and a nifty wireless hub control for all of your volume settings. Sure it's pricey, but if you want the ultimate in PC audio, the GigaWorks S750 is definitely the way to go. **Tom Ham**

Wireless command device

Logitech diNovo Media Desktop

www.logitech.com

Price: \$249.95

You want this. Sure, it may look like a cool wireless keyboard and mouse combo, but it's so much more. For starters, it's all based on Bluetooth technology—and we all love Bluetooth. The diNovo Media Desktop is broken into four parts—the keyboard, the mouse, a new multifunction MediaPad and a recharging module that serves as a Bluetooth hub. The MediaPad not only serves as a number pad and smart calculator, it also serves as a Bluetooth remote commander where you can access music, video and photos on your PC. Utilizing Windows Media Desktop Software, users can interface with their desktop PC from a distance with the MediaPad and access their media. The display on the MediaPad even displays when an email or Instant Message comes in. And since everything is Bluetooth, the hub allows for your PDA, cell phone (and any other Bluetooth device) to communicate with each other and your PC. Synchronization of your calendar, addresses and other information is instantaneous. With the included Logitech Mobile Phone Suite Software for Bluetooth, you can receive notification of incoming SMS text messages directly on your PC screen. Now that's rad. **Tom Ham**

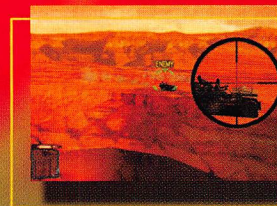


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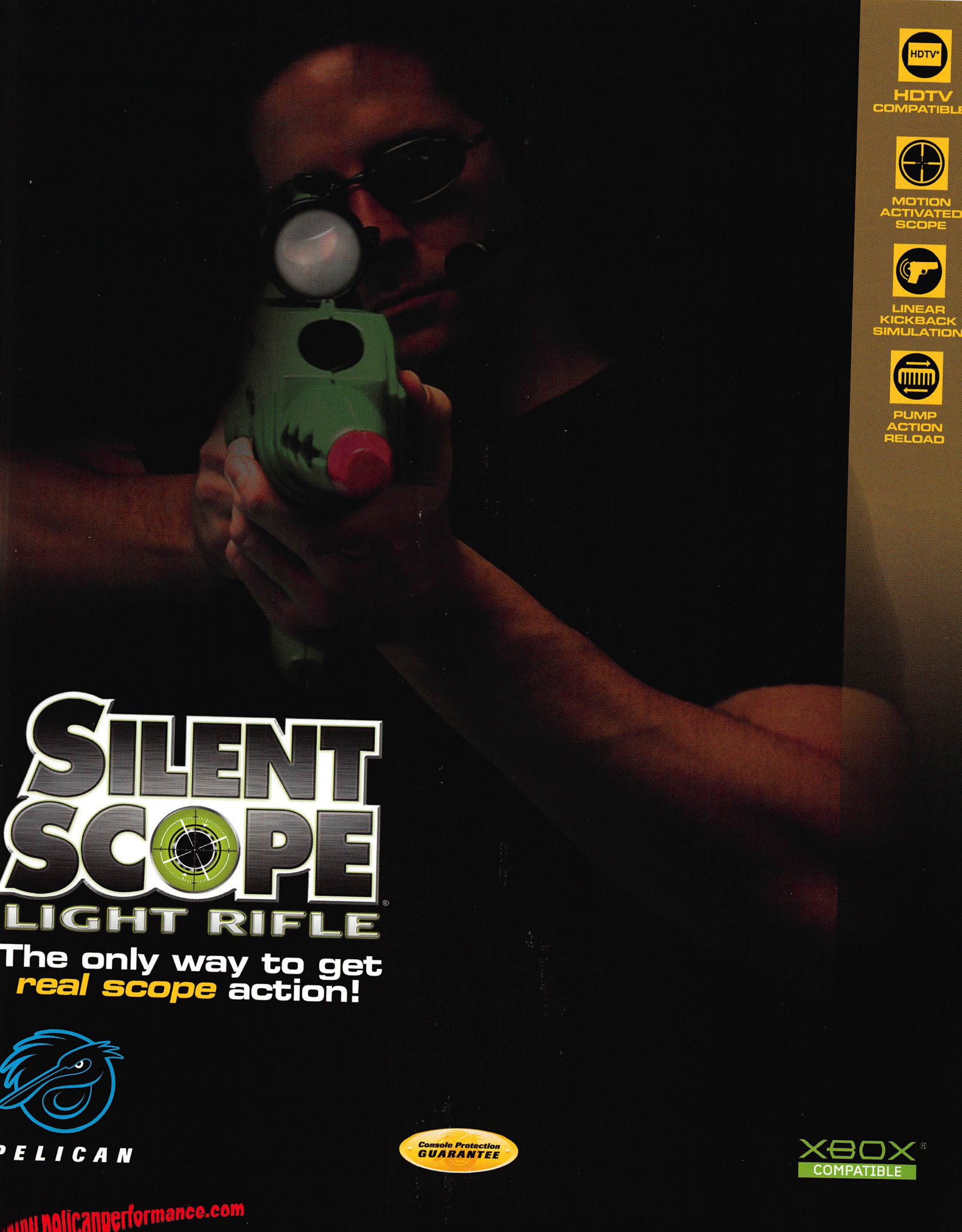
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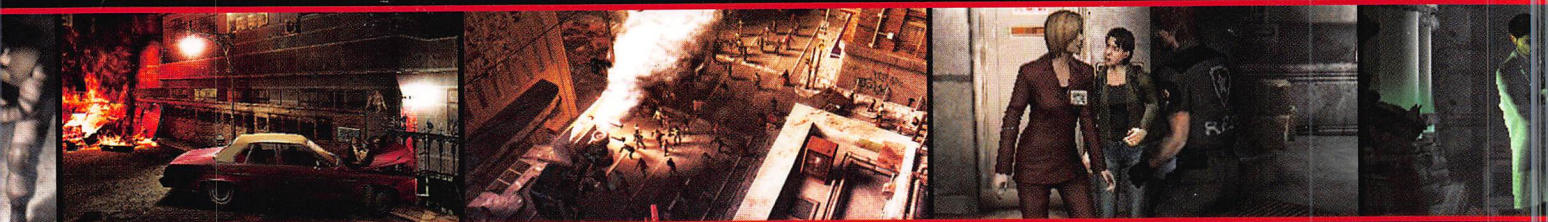
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